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AUTONOMOUS LEARNER. HOW IT WORKS

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Abstract

Autonomy in learning is a crucial component of education if they both, learning and education, intend to be successful. The formal education, however, does not give much space and support to learner' autonomy. It is limited by large numbers of learners (pupils or students) and by extensive knowledge that has to be covered within the curriculum regardless of the level in education system. However, as language learning aims at communication in the particular language, it requires lots of time with individual students. The time schedule and other subjects then reduce the possibilities within the school and both teaching and learning becomes even more challenging.

Annotatsiya

Ta'lim va avtonomiya, agar ular ham, o'rganish ham, ta'lim ham muvaffaqiyatli bo'lishni istasa, ta'limning muhim tarkibiy qismidir. Biroq, rasmiy ta'lim o'quvchilarning mustaqilligiga ko'p joy bermaydi va qo'llab-quvvatlamaydi. Bu ko'p sonli o'quvchilar (o'quvchilar yoki talabalar) va ta'lim tizimi darajasidan qat'i nazar, o'quv rejasida qamrab olinishi kerak bo'lgan keng bilim bilan cheklangan. Biroq, til o'rganish muayyan tilda muloqot qilishni maqsad qilganligi sababli, alohida talabalar bilan ko'p vaqt talab etiladi. Vaqt jadvali va boshqa fanlarmaktabdagi imkoniyatlarni kamaytiradi va o'qitish va o'rganish yanada qiyinlashadi.

Key words: Autonomy, foreign language learning, to address, conditions, positive feelings

Kalit so'zlar: avtonomiya, chet tilini o'rganish, murojaat qilish, shartlar, ijobiy his-tuyg'ular

Introduction

Autonomy means the ability to take control of one's own learning, independently or in collaboration with others. An autonomous learner will take more responsibility for learning and is likely to be more effective than a learner who is reliant on the teacher. Learner training in the classroom encourages autonomy and is an important element of language teaching.

An autonomous learner will set their own goals, reflect on their progress, and seek opportunities to practice outside the classroom.

In the classroom

Asking learners to keep diaries to reflect on the way they learn best, and teaching them how to use tools such as dictionaries can encourage autonomy. Asking the question, 'could the learners do this for themselves?' about any activity planned for class will help create the conditions for the development of greater learner autonomy in class.

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Autonomous learning attempts to address the problems with lack of time and individual approach limitations. Furthermore, it develops metacognitive skills that enable students see the learning from a different perspective and to get involved in the learning process more actively. Consequently, they are rewarded with full recognition and better results. The positive feelings about autonomous learning then anticipate a will to learn further; and the prospects for lifelong learning are plausible.

Autonomous learning is not a new phenomenon, even though this term only appeared in 1970s. When we look at the history of tertiary education and focus on the first European universities (Bologna, Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge etc.), autonomous learning played an important part in the students' lives. When we explore further in ancient times, we encounter Socrates and his questioning method that provokes students' critical thinking and subsequently their autonomy. Undeniably, the number of students then, in Middle Ages or in Ancient Greece, was a fraction of the numbers of people studying at universities today, however the need to support the autonomy remains.

Learner autonomy is when students take control and responsibility for their own learning, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it. It takes as its starting point the idea that students are capable of self-direction and are able to develop an independent, proactive approach to their studies.

In the field of higher education, learner autonomy is particularly important. Students may have limited classroom contact time for learning English but they may need to rapidly increase their knowledge and skills. It is therefore important for them to become self-reliant language learners who can continue learning efficiently outside the classroom.

At the heart of autonomous learning is the student's perception of their own role as a learner. Classroom discussion and one-to-one conversations with the teacher can help students to understand the essential part that they play in their own success in English. Establish that autonomous, dynamic students have the potential

to learn far more than passive, reactive learners. Self-reliant students can address their own individual needs and make ongoing progress.

Autonomy involves students having a range of learning strategies which they are able to apply flexibly in different contexts. Teachers can help students to develop learning strategies through learner training in the classroom and this can take many forms. One important practical step is awareness-raising on how to use self-reference tools such as English-English dictionaries and grammar books.

In the early stages of a course it is useful to demonstrate as a class how to use such resources effectively. For example, when reading a text in lessons, encourage students to choose a small number of new words which they are unable to deduce from context. Ask them to look up the words in an English-English dictionary. If there is more than one entry for the word, discuss which one is the correct meaning for that context. Use the opportunity to highlight the rich range of information found in a dictionary such as pronunciation and word class.

Encourage students to capitalize on their dictionary work by selecting and noting down any useful words in a personalized vocabulary book or list. Set students homework tasks such as reading a text of their choice and researching a limited number of words in an English-English dictionary. Encourage them to reflect on the process in class. This can help students to transfer skills beyond the classroom and become more resourceful and autonomous learners.

Teaching Tips - Developing Learner Autonomy

As busy teachers it is easy to get stuck in a rut. Our Teaching Tips articles are aimed at those of you who are teaching and are looking for some new ideas or activities to use in their classes. We hope that these articles will inspire you to try something new with your students.

Developing Learner Autonomy

‘Autonomy is your capacity to take responsibility for, and control of, your own learning, whether in an institutionalized context, or completely independent of a teacher or institution.’ (Thornbury, 2006: 22)

In contrast to traditional ‘lockstep learning’, which has learners doing the same thing at the same time, in the same way, and all expected to achieve roughly the same results, autonomous learning starts from the premise that the individual has the potential to take responsibility for everything in their own life, including learning.

While in the past what the learners should do, and how they should do it was typically decided by an authority figure i.e. the teacher, the director of studies or the education department, the notion of autonomous learning has gained in popularity since the 1980s.

Why foster learner autonomy?

Anyone who has attempted to learn a new language knows that language learning takes a relatively long time, and a learner may not want to, or be able to enrol in a teaching program for such a long duration. Likewise, for institutions, it means learning can take place without having a teacher/tutor/facilitator physically present in all instances of learning.

The key benefit of learner autonomy is that autonomous learners ‘will take more responsibility for learning and are likely to be more effective than learners who are overly-reliant on the teacher.’ (Swift)

**‘Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning.’
(Lowry)**

What do learners need to become autonomous?

The belief that they can learn independently of the teacher and the classroom setup. Some cultures have authoritarian learning systems that produce very dependent learners.

A willingness to undertake independent learning i.e. to take on the responsibility in terms of goal setting, time management, selecting materials and conducting self/peer assessment.

A realistic and positive attitude to language learning (sometimes this may be undermined by previous learning experiences, requiring coaching from the teacher).

Strategies – this is where the teacher becomes invaluable as a resource to the aspiring learners. There is a need for learner training, as autonomy does not happen overnight. Remember, autonomy does not equate with working in isolation. The teacher, the class and the school are still part of the learner’s environment.

Doesn’t fostering learner autonomy remove the teacher from the learning process?

In a word, no. Many learners come to the language class from a background of authoritative teaching. Their previous learning experience may well have conditioned them to be heavily reliant on the teacher for approval, direction, instruction, organization and learning strategies. We can’t simply expect these learners to be autonomous, and there is typically a real need to develop learner autonomy in the classroom. Eventually the learner is equipped to conduct his/her ongoing learning outside the classroom and even evaluate it. The learner should come to see the teacher in her role as a facilitator and resource rather than the ‘unquestionable authority’.

Furthermore, although a learner may develop skills of autonomous learning, this doesn’t preclude them from participating in language classroom lessons.

Which skills does the teacher need to foster to develop learner autonomy? This is largely dependent on how independent you expect your students to become. Initially teachers can develop skills that students need in order to find access and use resources; such as internet sites or online journals, supported by activities that are completed as homework tasks. Eventually this leads to students developing their own skills for setting objectives, planning their self-study, and even self-assessment.

It’s important to acknowledge that autonomy is a matter of degree, not ‘either/or’. Nunan points out that this is developed in stages, starting from fostering awareness of the learning goals and the content of the materials learners are using, and developing into a ‘transcendence’ as learners go beyond the classroom to make links between the content of the classroom learning and the world beyond. How deep the

learner is able to develop this process depends on the teacher, the learner and the resources available.

Examples of strategies to help develop learner autonomy (Swift)

Suggestions for developing learner autonomy:

There are many resources that teachers can draw from in order to encourage learner autonomy. Some, such as social networking sites, are often exploited by learners before teachers utilize them for teaching purposes.

General and specialist dictionaries:

Many have learner orientation tasks to teach learners strategies for using dictionaries as well as language references sections to aid learning.

Journals and periodicals – especially for ESP or EAP students

Keeping a reflective journal about the learning experience

- Television
- Documentaries
- News
- Radio Streaming
- Internet
- Language exchange with other language learners e.g. livemocha.com
- Online PPT presentations e.g. authorstream.com or slideshare.com
- ESL resources using graded or authentic material from the following websites:
- <http://www.pearsonlongman.com/index.html>
- <http://www.bbcactiveenglish.com/>
- <http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/>
- <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>
- Course books routinely provide extended practice through multimedia
- Online discussion boards (from football to movies cooking and vehicle maintenance)
- Reviews available for books they've read or movies they've seen

- Exam preparation sites
- You Tube and other social networking media such as wikis and blogs

‘If a teacher raises awareness that these resources can be accessed and utilized independently for further self-study, many students will do so. Learner training and demo-ing are crucial.’ (Krzanowski, 2007)

‘Learners [are] ‘quick on the uptake’ and embrace it easily. Teachers [are] not always keen. At times [they] are so deep in ritualistic behavior that they would not make an effort to accept and take on innovations in learning and teaching.’ (Krzanowski, 2007)

While this article hopefully encourages you to consider how you might develop the principles of autonomy with your learners, a much more thorough knowledge of these principles can be developed by doing your own autonomous learning on the topic, a good place to start would be the links provided in the references below.

Encouraging Student Autonomy

Giving your student the answer to one of these short questions does not really teach the student anything. Most of the time, they don’t really even learn the new information that you give them there and then. They’re not really interested in “what the English word for x is”, they just need it so that they can move on. And as soon as they have it, that’s exactly what they do: move on. They don’t absorb the information or learn it for the future. The reason for this is that there is no effort, no engagement, and no cognitive process.

In order to ensure that a) the student truly learns the information they are asking about and b) they are better equipped to answer the question alone in the future, you need to make them work for it. Instead of giving the answer away for free, prompt the student to think about it carefully, to see what they are capable of working out themselves. To do this effectively, there are a few stages to go through.

The first response is to simply tell the student to think for themselves. This might at first appear dismissive, but the reality is many students will automatically ask the teacher the moment they come to something remotely taxing, especially if

they have a teacher or school environment that endorses such behaviour with quick answers. By simply putting the onus back on the student, it might be enough to make them realise that actually, it's not so difficult after all and with just a little thought, they can answer their own question. This is as simple as asking, "Take another look. Think about it. What do you think x might mean?" or perhaps, "Remember, we learned this before. You already know this."

Understanding from Context

This reflection of the question will work with surprising frequency. But when it doesn't, it's time to guide the student through some thinking processes to get to the answer. The first of these is understanding from context. This is a skill that a lot of native speakers use with their native language quite naturally, but it does not come so automatically when dealing with foreign languages. As teachers, it is our responsibility to develop this skill for our students.

We start by asking the student to read the sentence and see if the context provides clues as to the meaning. If they understand the gist of the sentence already, then they should be able to work out something about the meaning of the word in question. Sometimes, the sentence is not particularly helpful. An example I like to give is the word divorce in the following sentence:

Conclusion

Learner autonomy is your students' ability to learn by themselves, to take it upon themselves to develop their understanding without relying on the teacher, either for motivation or for easy answers. If we don't make efforts to develop learner autonomy then our students will struggle when they leave school and find that they have to face the world themselves and solve problems without the support of an ever-present aide.

The good news is, there are many ways to develop learner autonomy, from the way you arrange independent and group activities to the amount of time you dedicate to task-based learning and problem solving. In this article, I am going to talk about something that might seem small but is often overlooked by teachers and can have

a significant impact on your students' whole approach to learning as well as improving the effectiveness of their learning at the time.

Despite the fruitful findings, there remain some limitations. Firstly, the traditional learning methods in which an EFL teacher plays a key role in the classroom has certain impacts on the learners' autonomous learning, especially, their awareness of autonomy. In fact, it is not an easy task to replace familiar teaching methods with totally new ones. Secondly, the researcher was in charge of the experimental teaching, which to some extent affected the validity and reliability of the study.

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