PRINT: ISSN 0975-1122 ONLINE: ISSN 2456-6322
Int J Edu Sci, 27(1-3): 18-22 (2019)
DOI: 10.31901/24566322.2019/27.1-3.1095

# Trends and Problems of Updated Approaches to Learner Autonomy

**L. Shayakhmetova[1], L. Svirina[2], R. F. Zhussupova[3] and Z. A. Beisembayeva[4]**

*[1]Kazan Federal University, Department of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, Russian Federation*
*[2]Kazan Federal University, Department of Language and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, Russian Federation*
*[3,4]Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Department of International History Studies, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan*
*E-mail: [1]<habirshah@mail.ru>, [2]< l.o.svirina@yandex.ru >, [3]< r.f.zhussupova@mail.ru.>, [4]< z.a.beisembayeva@mail.ru.>*

**KEYWORDS** Learner Autonomy. Learning Strategies. Sample Classroom Activities

**ABSTRACT** Learner autonomy in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has been a pivotal issue for a long time. Since the beginning of the millennium era, there have been numerous studies to promote learner autonomy in different levels of foreign language teaching. In this paper, reasons for developing learner autonomy are explained, and then new approaches in experimental teaching for pre-service EFL education students are highlighted. In addition, language learning strategies are explored, sample classroom activities are investigated, and useful resources on learner autonomy are suggested.

## INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy and learners' needs are considered as key issues in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Moreover, learners have to become aware of their responsibilities in learning a second language (Mackey and Gass 2015). Google Chairman, Eric Schmidt, who has led his company as one of the most successful global mega-corporations in the recent history, operates a formula for innovation which involves, amongst other things, allowing employees doing activities unrelated to their employment for ten percent of their working hours (Schmidt 1982; Szalai 2015). In the company's view, successful nurture and development of the staff require giving them the freedom to explore their intellectual space, and may be seen to have a profoundly beneficial effect on the company and the individuals working there (Pelgrum and Law 2003; Woo et al. 2018).

In secondary education throughout the working days, students are also instructed as to exactly what they should be learning and how they should be learning it. By contrast, both preschool and early school education, as well as postgraduate education, allow for a considerable degree of learner autonomy (Benson 2013; Yasmin and Sohail 2018).

A standard component of many statements of the purpose of formal education is that learners should be taught and motivated to think for themselves. Moreover, they should be constantly self-educating, be equipped for lifelong learning, taught to ask questions continually, and also have freedom of mind. These objectives and many other formulations of the purpose of education necessarily entail learner autonomy (Wutoh et al. 2015).

On a fundamental level, all learning is autonomous. The autonomy exercised as part of the learning process may also be reduced by coercion or excessive structuring as well as restricting access to resources; or increased by improving privacy, resourcing, and reducing restraints upon learners. An autonomous learner is one who is, by rights, self-motivated, self-educating, independent in learning, capable of applying skills learned in the classroom and beyond it and constantly engaged in transfer (Ceylan 2015; Batyra 2016).

In this regard, little defined learner autonomy as a slippery notion since it is characterized either by learner responsibility or complementary teacher autonomy (Little 1999). Moore and Keegan (1993) also suggested that learner autonomy could be identified by numerous functions of students' own learning. Precisely, learner autonomy is classified according to students' learning goals, learning processes, evaluation, approaches, skills, organization, motivation, as well as information processing abilities (Moore and Keegan 1993).

Most contemporary theorists of education also acknowledge the benefits of learner autonomy. Most teachers do not discourage students' initiatives in terms of deepening their knowledge of a particular subject or improving their skills in a particular area on their own initiatives. However, the question of the limits of autonomy and the desirability of a large degree of autonomy in learning remains as a moot one (Mills 2017).

The homeschooling movement, and to a more radical extent, the unschooling movement, have both traditionally promoted autonomous learning. While the capacity of homeschooled students to excel in higher education has been frequently remarked, one of the striking aspects of self-guided learning is how quickly students choose to specialize. Students who discover that they have a tremendous aptitude for physics, for example, may choose to focus obsessively on this subject, perhaps at the expense of a balance in classical disciplines (Balasubramaniam et al. 2018; Maranto and Bell 2018).

The desirability of this propensity towards highly-specialized subjects and even sub-disciplinary focus and the obsessive pursuit of both interests and strengths on behalf of homeschooled students have remained unclear. Certainly, acquiring not just deep knowledge of a few particular fields, but analytical skills, which are used by practitioners in this field, are of incalculable benefit, as with, say, the critical reasoning skills, which one would be expected to develop in the study of law; however, the question remains as to whether this comes at the expense of a certain breadth of knowledge and skills or not (Yasmin and Sohail 2018).

Ironically, in recent years, with the success and growth of homeschooling movement, and the proliferation of fully-developed study programs, homeschooling has begun increasingly to resemble traditional educational programs, albeit conducted via the Internet from a domestic setting. In this scenario, many of the traditional benefits of homeschooling would seem to be in danger of being lost. So, good lesson planning, modern teaching techniques, as well as new approaches all help language learners to be autonomous students.

Scharle and Szabo (2000) also determined autonomy as freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, to make a decision, to take responsibilities and risks, and to have to deal with consequences of one's own actions (Scharle and Szabo 2000; Mills 2017).

In general, however, traditional homeschooling can be seen to be one of the most radical ways of promoting learner autonomy. In countries wherein it is legal, it enjoys only at best marginal popularity, but its value to educational research should not be underestimated. With regard to regular secondary education, a question also remains as to whether students, if empowered to learn autonomously, would possess the discipline to develop the characteristics of effective autonomous learners or not. This paper is to explore the desirability and consequences of this structural imbalance.

### Objectives

The objectives were classified as follows:

- To give students the chance to practice English as much as possible
- To teach students new forms on learner autonomy skills
- To teach students to communicate effectively

## METHODOLOGY

The experimental teaching was conducted at the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in the city of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. The research was organized for 50 third-year pre-service students of the specialty "Foreign Languages" during the term in 2019. The participants included learners of different nationalities: Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek, German, Kirgiz, Ukraine, etc. aged 19-20 years. They had mastered their own native language, the language of communication either Kazakh or Russian and less than one foreign language.

A total of 15 weeks was scheduled for data collection. The discipline under this research was English for Specific Purposes (ESP) according to the syllabus. The types of learning strategies applied in experimental teaching had been proposed by Chamot and O'Malley (Chamot and O'Malley 1994). These types of learning strategies were based in part on theory and on the observation that students could report using what seemed to be executive skills with learning tasks while also using strategies that could be applied directly to learning activities. Hence, three types of learning strategies were metacognitive, cognitive, and social ones:

***Metacognitive Strategies****:* lesson planning, monitoring language comprehension, and evaluation;

***Cognitive Strategies****:* resources, materials, and classroom management;

***Social Strategies****:* interaction, cooperative learning, and effective control.

Each group was divided into two subgroups due to the academic aptitude: subgroup "A" and subgroup "B," 15 students in each one. Subgroup "A" overall had the same scores and level of knowledge as subgroup "B." The research was held in group "B" as the experimental one via implementing teaching speaking assessed with the help of new approaches to learner autonomy, while group "A" was assigned as the control group receiving a traditional teaching approach.

As mentioned above, the experimental teaching was organized into three types of learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, and social. Firstly, students were asked to use the Internet so that to bring quotes that could give positive energy to their peers in the classroom.

Then, during face-to-face group discussion, they drew the pictures of the words that were given in a definite quote describing the words verbally. The next task they needed to do was to identify or create their own social advertising text to the definite quote and make a poster.

Finally, the students brought the poster they had created and showed it to their peers and talked about the issue of any social problem in society. The following activity was organized in such away. Students were asked to search the Internet and bring pictures and photos of different kinds of hobbies to their speaking classes. They were also asked to do pair and group work activities while talking about leisure time.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students were quite united; that is, they respected and valued each other. The academic proficiency of the whole group was also high enough. There was no evident leader in the class. The pre-experimental data analysis of the students' writing and speaking skills was also conducted before the experiment so that to check it after experimental teaching (Table 1).

The results of skills development before the experiment were counted by testing. As can be seen, the control group passed the tests more successfully and got higher scores compared with the experimental one. The results obtained in this study are in good agreement with those obtained from Woo et al. (2018) study.

In comparison, only 6 percent of the students in the experimental group received 95-100 points, but this value was 8 percent in the control group. Moreover, 10 percent of the students in the experimental group received 60-64 points compared with the control group (8%). As well, 2 percent of the students in the experimental group scored 55-59 points. The post-experimental data analysis of the skills of the students was also conducted before the experiment, so that to check it after experimental teaching (Table 2).

After experimental teaching, both groups took the tests and got the following results described above in Table 2. The results of speaking after the experiment were then counted by rubrics. Accordingly, both the control and experimental groups passed the tests nearly equally. The results obtained in this study are in good agreement with those obtained from Yasmin and

**Table 1: Data of students' achievement in developing learner autonomy skills before the experiment**

| *Score (points)* | *95-100A* | *90-94A-* | *85-89B+* | *80-84B* | *75-79B-* | *70-74C+* | *65-69C* | *60-64C-* | *55-59D+* | *50-54D* | *0-49F* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The control group (%) | 8 | 16 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 8 | - | - | - |
| The experimental group (%) | 6 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 13 | 14 | 13 | 10 | 2 | - | - |

**Table 2: Data of students' achievement in developing learner autonomy skills after the experiment**

| *Score (points)* | *95-100A* | *90-94A-* | *85-89B+* | *80-84B* | *75-79B-* | *70-74C+* | *65-69C* | *60-64C-* | *55-59D+* | *50-54D* | *0-49F* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The control group (%) | 8 | 16 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 6 | - | - | - |
| The experimental group (%) | 8 | 15 | 16 | 14 | 14 | 13 | 10 | 10 | - | - | - |

Sohail (2018), study (Yasmin and Sohail 2018; Maranto and Bell 2018).

The students in the experimental group were more successful because they obtained the same scores (95-100 points). As well, 10 percent of the students in the experimental group got 65-69 scores, but this value in the control group was by 12 percent. The experimental group could also improve their scores, and nobody got 55-59 points. Actually, in comparison with the control group, the moderated average variance of the experimental group was higher in many scores. The results pointed out that all the participants of the control group had made some improvements after the study, but such improvements were not as huge as the ones made by the learners in the experimental group. The results obtained in this study are in good agreement with those obtained from Mills (2017), study (Mills 2017; Maranto and Bell 2018).

Comparing the results of learner autonomy skills before and after the experiment as a whole, it was concluded that the scores of the control and experimental groups had improved, and even the students in the experimental group had received higher points after experimental teaching.

Thus, the present study attempted to address the problem of learner autonomy skills development while investigating the improvement of students' linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as the effects of tasks used for assessing students and autonomous means of teaching.

There were, however, two principal concerns: firstly, how to measure success in a situation in which the students were studying autonomously; and secondly, how to structure and guide the students through the learning process (Maranto and Bell 2018).

To the extent that learner autonomy is provided for and promoted, teachers should be expected to be a genuine subject specialist, even at the expense of methodological knowledge. Autonomous learners' requirements vis-a-vis the teachers are mainly as a resource provider and facilitator, but not an instructor per se. Autonomous learning does not threaten the role of the teacher - in the way that mass Internet instruction might - rather; it moves the focus away from pedagogy and onto subject knowledge (Yasmin and Sohail 2018).

Measuring success is thus a critical component of an education system, which provides for a high degree of learner autonomy. Assessment activities should thus reflect the fact that students may be well acquiring a more diverse range of skills and knowledge. Assessments should also be varied enough to reflect this, and the criteria of assessment should reflect the fact that success in learning consists of more than a discrete set of skills or knowledge of very particular contents. Nonetheless, assessments need not be open-ended. Assessment designers may thus choose to assess critical and analytical skills with very specific case studies or problem sets with definite answers or particular expected outcomes. The results obtained in this study are in good agreement with those obtained from Balasubramaniam et al. (2018) study (Balasubramaniam et al. 2018).

## CONCLUSION

That the development of an autonomous learner represents one of the central goals of TEFL education has been widely noted. Traditionally, this goal would be reached through highly-structured academic programs with an emphasis on breadth of knowledge and discreet sets of knowledge and skills. Given the spiritual, moral, and ethical demands of 21st century living, with information and communication technology (ICT) movement towards autonomy in many areas of society and economy, increased learner autonomy in all secondary learning environments is one of the most pressing demands on education reform. In the current study, reasons for developing learner autonomy are explained, and then new approaches in experimental teaching for pre-service EFL education students are highlighted. Comparing the results of learner autonomy skills before and after the experiment as a whole, it was concluded that the scores of the control and experimental groups had improved, and even the students in the experimental group had received higher points after experimental teaching.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that the content of this research paper be studied in other aspects of Updated Approaches to Learner Autonomy in order to provide a general overview.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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**Paper Received for publication in October, 2019**
**Paper accepted for publication iin December, 2019**