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Bozena Horvathova

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DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY



6

Why is autonomy desirable?

Božena
Horváthová

6.1 Learner Autonomy in Higher Education

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Development of learner autonomy

WHY IS AUTONOMY DESIRABLE?

6.1 LEARNER AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Before discussing the issues of learner autonomy in all its different aspects, it is necessary to introduce the following thought of Little (1994, p. 81): *“As social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence, our essential condition is one of **interdependence** whereas total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism”*. Also Mariani (1997) understands autonomy as one end of a continuum and the other end is its opposite - dependence. A learner can place herself/himself along this continuum, and his/her position can change over time and according to given circumstances (e.g. personal or institutional constraints). It is essential to experience and to manage both autonomy and dependence according to ones' own needs in order to make informed choices.

6.1.1 History and Importance of Learner Autonomy

Gremo and Riley (1995) examined the broader historical background of autonomy as well as ideas and concepts that contributed to the development of autonomy generally in educational and specifically in language learning context. They identified a variety of important factors and created a shortlist of the most influential reasons for the emergence of learner autonomy (ibid. 152-154):

- The minority right movements
- The reaction against behaviourism among educationalists, philosophers, psychologists and linguists
- Development of adult education
- Increase in the school and university population, wider access to education in many countries and development of new educational structures dealing with large number of learners
- Increased demand for foreign languages
- The commercialization of much language provision and the perception of language learner's role
- Development in technology

These historically grounded reasons are tightly interconnected with the classification of arguments scholars give to highlight the importance of fostering learner autonomy.

Little (1994) differentiates between *general educational arguments* for autonomy and *psychological arguments* for autonomy. The general arguments speak for progress of democratic states which must undertake educational measures to develop the capacity of their citizens to think and act as free and self-determining individuals. The psychological arguments suggest that the most efficient learners are those who know how to assimilate new information in terms of what they already know and how to transfer their existing knowledge on a new learning task.

Cotterall (1995) gives *philosophical, pedagogical, and practical reasons* for autonomy in language learning. The philosophical reasoning is the belief that learners have the right to make choices with regard to their learning. Pedagogical justification states that especially adults feel more secure in their learning, they learn more and more effectively, when they can participate in making decisions about the pace, sequence, mode and the content of instruction. The practical argument is that a teacher may not always be available to assist learners need to be able to learn on their own.

6.1.2 Definition of Autonomy

Littlewood (1999, p. 73) states: "If we define autonomy in educational terms as involving students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners everywhere, since it is obvious that no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout life." Thus he advocates for the perception of autonomy as an essential goal of all learning.

Autonomy can take a variety of different forms depending on *learning context, learning content, process of learning and learner characteristics*. The oldest definition of autonomy from Holec (1981, p. 3) describes autonomy as "the ability to take charge of ... [his or her] learning." According to Little (1994, p. 81) we recognise autonomy in a wide variety of behaviours "as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action." Benson (2001, p. 47) prefers to use the term "the capacity to take control of one's own learning", because it allows for easier examination than 'charge' or 'responsibility'. Later Benson and Voller (1997, p. 2, c.f. Thanasoulas 2000) suggest the term autonomy a) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; b) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; c) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; d) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; and e) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. A helpful approach might be to describe what autonomy *is not*. According to Little (1994, p. 81) autonomy is not:

- a synonym for self-instruction - autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher,
- a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can - autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher,
- something that teachers do to learners - it is not another teaching method,
- a single, easily described behaviour,

- a steady state achieved by learners.

As the interconnection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy will be discussed later, it is important to provide a definition of the teacher autonomy as well. Teacher autonomy can be defined as “teachers’ willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning” (Huang 2006, p. 41).

6.1.3 Autonomy as Process

It was already suggested at the beginning of the chapter that learning to be autonomous is an individual, gradual, never ending progression. As Holec (1981, pp. 25-26) explains, the most common situation “will be that of learners who are not yet autonomous but are involved in the process of acquiring the ability to assume responsibility for their learning”. This idea is also supported by Candy (1991) who states that “learner autonomy is a *constant process* open to educational interventions, rather than a state, which is reached once and for all.” Thus based on the fact that autonomy is not a product, but it is a process, Oxford (2008) describes the notion of autonomy in the following ways 1) *autonomy as stages*, 2) *autonomy as part of a spiral* and 3) *autonomy as degrees/levels*.

1. She discusses two stage theories: a) Vygotsky`s (1978, 1981) *social-constructivist theory of stages* and b) Nunan`s (1997) *theory of stages*.

a) Vygotsky (1978, 1981) presents a social-constructivist theory of stages of development of internal self-regulation. Learning occurs through the learner’s dialogues with a more competent person, who ‘mediates’ the learning. Self-regulation is achieved by moving through three stages: (1) *social speech* - interaction with the more capable person, who models higher-order thinking skills; (2) *egocentric speech* - overtly giving oneself instructions for applying such skills; and (3) *inner speech* - mental self-guidance, a sign that the learner has fully internalised such skills. This theory implies a close relationship between the more competent person and the learner. However, in the independent foreign language learning situation such a relationship is difficult because the tutor (if one exists) is at a distance and does not work constantly with the learner. Learning in independent foreign language situations is mediated primarily by computer programmes, textbooks, handbooks, videos, websites.

b) Nunan`s (1997, In. Oxford 2008) theory concentrates on classroom-based foreign language learners, whose autonomy grows and changes through five stages: (1) awareness - the learner is the recipient of information; (2) involvement - learner is the reviewer and selector among given options; (3) intervention - learner adapts official goals; (4) creation - learner is the inventor, originator and creator of his/hers own goals; (5) transcendence – learner identify their own interests and create goals relevant to those.

2. *Autonomy as part of a spiral* developed by Little (2000b) extends Vygotsky`s theory of stages and the concept of interdependence mentioned above. It describes autonomy as part of a learning spiral. The learner progresses to new levels of independence by first moving through additional phases of interdependence (with a

teacher or others). This suggests that autonomy is not a linear matter of stages or degrees but part of the curving movement of the spiral.

3. *Autonomy as degree/level* represents the idea that learner autonomy is not all-or-nothing and it serves as a rough substitute for the much more complicated reality. Littlewood (1996) speaks about levels of behaviour at which a person makes independent choices or decisions. The hierarchy goes from low-level choices which control the specific operations through which the activity is carried out to high-level choices which control the overall activity. In between, he distinguishes any number of levels.

6.1.4 Components of Autonomy and Decision-making

Littlewood (1996) examines the components that make up autonomy in language learning. He defines (ibid. p. 427) an autonomous person as “one who has an independent *capacity* to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions”. According to Littlewood (ibid. p. 428) this capacity depends on two main components: *ability* and *willingness*. This means that, on one hand, a person may have the ability to make independent choices but no willingness to do so. On the other hand, a person may be willing to make independent choices but not have the ability to do so. *Ability* and *willingness* can further be divided into two components. ***Ability*** depends on possessing *knowledge* about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and *skills* for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. ***Willingness*** depends on having both the *motivation* and the *confidence* to take responsibility for the choices required. To be successful in acting autonomously, all of these four components need to be present together.

It is obvious that *decision-making* and *making choices* is the core of the learner autonomy. Holec's (1981, p. 3) comments the range of the autonomous learner's control in terms of making the following decisions: determining objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring procedures of acquisition and evaluating what has been acquired”. Oxford (2008) extends the list of possible decisions related to: (1) the language to be learned; (2) the purpose, general content, topics, and specific tasks of the foreign language learning; (3) the amount and type of directions the learner needs; (4) the kinds of learning strategies to be used; (5) the nature, frequency, and reporting format of assessment; (6) formality or informality of the learning; (7) timing; and (8) location (e.g. at a self-access centre, on the phone or computer at home, or elsewhere).

6.1.5 Teacher and Learner Roles

The shift in control from teacher to learner is crucial to an autonomous approach regardless of the particular organisational structure. It involves a change in role, and can bring feelings of anxiety, uncertainty or discomfort (Little, 1995). Teachers in all educational contexts are the human interface between learners and resources. They can only help their learners to develop a capacity for critical reflection if they have this capacity themselves. It is strongly argued in the field of second/foreign language education that learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy.

Learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant in the learning process. Teachers change their role from source of information to counsellor and manager of learning resources. New roles for teachers also include (Yang, 1998) *helpers, facilitators, advisors, guides, active participants, and consultants*.

In the context of applying autonomy within classroom learning and designing courses based on learner autonomy, which will be addressed later, one more role of the teacher should be mentioned. According to Benson (2000) and Huang (2006) the teacher's role is to *mediate* between the learners' right to autonomy and the constraints that inhibit the exercise of this right as well as to *explain* and *justify* these constraints to his or her learners. Omaggio (1978, cited in Thanasoulas pp. 117-118) provides seven main attributes of autonomous learners who:

- have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
- take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- are willing to take risks - to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- are good guessers;
- attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply;
- have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

To relate teacher roles in fostering learner autonomy to the foreign language learning, Little (n. d.) lists the following steps teacher should take:

- use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of the learners;
- involve the learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class;
- help the learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation;
- require from the learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- require from the learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce;
- engage the learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class.

As for learners and their autonomy in foreign language learning, Littlewood (1996, pp. 429-430) names the following abilities:

- learners are able to make their own choices in grammar and vocabulary (e.g. in controlled role-plays and simple tasks involving information exchange). This is the initial step towards “autonomous communication”;
- learners choose the meanings they want to express and the communication strategies they will use in order to achieve their communicative goals;
- learners are able to make more far-reaching decisions about goals, meanings and strategies (e.g. in creative role-playing, problem-solving and discussion);
- learners begin to choose and shape their own learning contexts, e.g. in self-directed learning and project work;
- learners become able to make decisions in domains which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, e.g. about materials and learning tasks;
- learners participate in determining the nature and progression of their own syllabus;
- learners are able to use language (for communication and learning) independently in situations of their choice outside the classroom.

Autonomy represents reshaping of teacher and learner roles and shift of responsibility from teachers to learners due to a change in the distribution of power and authority. Since autonomy involves a transfer of the control over learning decisions from the teacher to the learners, Huang (2006) perceives learner autonomy as a process concerned with the *negotiation* between teacher and learner in an atmosphere of *genuine dialogue* and *collegiality*.

6.2 DESIGNING COURSE BASED ON LEARNER AUTONOMY

6.2.1 Autonomy within Independent Learning and Classroom Learning

Little (1994), Oxford (2008) and Reinders (2010) differentiate between two contrasting learning contexts: *independent learning* (outside the full-time educational system) and *classroom learning* (within the educational system). Autonomy connects these two types of learning, although it is associated more with independent learning than with classroom learning. Autonomy should be employed both in independent and classroom learning. However, the number and types of decisions made by the learner differ in the two situations.

According to Oxford (2008) *independent language learning* is the learning of a language without the involvement of a teacher. Such learning can occur alone or with other learners; it can be formal or informal. Frameworks designed to promote independent language learning are based on a combination of *learning resources* (available in print, internet (Learning Management Systems), compact disc, television, radio, video (e.g. VHS, DVD), phone or a combination) and *learner counselling* (a self-

access centre, a tutor via email or in person, a learner support group, a chat room, a printed or Web-based guidebook on how to learn and other media support).

Classroom learning inside the system has more limitations over which learners (and teachers) have no control. Benson (2000, p. 116) summarises four categories of limitations on the promotion of learner autonomy within a given educational context: a) *policy constraints* on language in education, b) *institutional constraints* (rules, regulations, certification, examinations, curriculums, the physical and social organisation of the school and classroom practices, c) *conceptions of language* (what the target language is, the ways in which it is organised and correct usage) and d) *language teaching methodologies* (assumptions about how languages are learned, and relevant learning resources and activities).

Reinders (2010, p. 44) speaks within these two learning contexts aimed at fostering autonomy about *specialist* and *general approaches*. *Specialist approaches* include the deliberate programs that do not form part of regular classroom teaching, and have the development of autonomy as one of their primary aims (learner training, strategy instruction, self-access, language advising or language counselling, specific tools). *General approaches* look at ways in which teachers can encourage autonomy in the classroom.

6.2.2 Frameworks for Implementing Autonomy in Classroom Learning

As already suggested at the beginning of the chapter the problem with the concept of autonomy is that it is still unclear what exactly the term means. It comprises other notions such as motivation, awareness, interaction, reflection, evaluation and self-evaluation, strategy use, metacognition etc. therefore some scholars doubt that it can be broken down into component parts to be measured. Reinders (2010, p. 42) states that “as result, few practical models or frameworks exist that could systematically guide teachers in implementing autonomy in the classroom”.

In spite of the limitations that can hinder a teacher in creating a course aimed at supporting learner autonomy, in this section some *principles*, *course strategies*, and *approaches* to designing a course based on fostering learner autonomy are introduced by Cotterall (1995 and 2000), Mariani (1997) and Reinders (2010). The frameworks were developed both to a range of learners in any educational setting and the context of language education.

6.2.2.1 Course strategy for learner autonomy

Cotterall (1995) reports that autonomy is not something which can be added to existing learning programmes, but that it has to be implied throughout the entire curriculum. According to her it is important to promote autonomy within the overall language programme and not just that of the classroom. Autonomy as a goal cannot be realized until it is integrated into the structure of the programme. She introduces a general structure of autonomy-based English for Academic Purposes course as well as its modifications after running it for thirty years. The course is based on these components (ibid. pp. 221-222):

- *Learner/teacher dialogue*

At the beginning of the course it is aimed at establishing a personal relationship and setting and objectives, at the mid-point at assessing and discussing the learner's progress and at the end of the course at advising learners on their future study. The dialogue between learners and the class teacher is central to the fostering of autonomy.

- *Learning a Language study theme*

This component presents key concepts in language learning, and encourages learners to explore the amount and type of language input, and its use in arranging adequate practice opportunities. It also provides an introduction to a basic meta-language to talk about their language learning and incorporates open discussion of objectives, methodology, and expectations.

- *Classroom tasks and materials*

The tasks aim to imitate those which learners encounter in 'real-world' situations and to incorporate language support. Learners' difficulties are talked through afterwards, and different follow-up classroom activities are provided. Tasks contain consciousness-raising elements for establishing the link between classroom practice and learning needs and helping learners to see the 'out-of-class dimension of tasks which take place within the classroom. The materials encourage learners to take the initiative in their language learning by explicitly showing the relationship between classroom language learning activities and learners' developing language competence.

- *Student record booklet*

This component includes the aspect of monitoring to the learning process. Each learner receives his/her copy of the student record booklet at the start of the course. The booklet comprises of two sections. The first section contains a series of self-assessment scales and a place to record personal objectives. The second section is concerned with monitoring learning activity through graphs and charts on which learners record their activities and progress. The overall aim is to encourage learners to record important moments in their experience of the course and to take an active role in expressing their learning objectives and assessing whether, how and to what extent these are met.

- *Self-access centre*

The last component represents the provision of independent study facilities in form of self-study materials for learners who have identified needs and they wish to address them in their own time at their own pace. Especially, listening resources are considered to be of great importance since listening skill development is ideally suited to independent practice. However, two things have to be mentioned: the self-access centre is seen as only one resource among others for solving language-related problems and providing a large number of attractive self-study resources does not automatically turn dependent learners into autonomous ones.

6.2.2.2 Design Principles for Course Developing Autonomy

Cotterall (2000) also proposes five course design principles for language courses which seek to foster learner autonomy. All the principles contribute to the transfer of responsibility and relate to the following (ibid. pp. 111-112):

- The course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies - Cotterall (1995) has developed a survey that aims to measure students' readiness for autonomy which can be a starting point for determining how much preparation students are going to need (see Recommended Reading).
- Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process - a simplified model of language learning is depicted in the Figure 1.
- Course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks - is linked to the first principle.
- The course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance - is interconnected with extending the choice of learning strategies.
- The course promotes reflection on learning - is connected to ability to reflect critically on one's learning and to evaluate the effectiveness of one's learning progression.

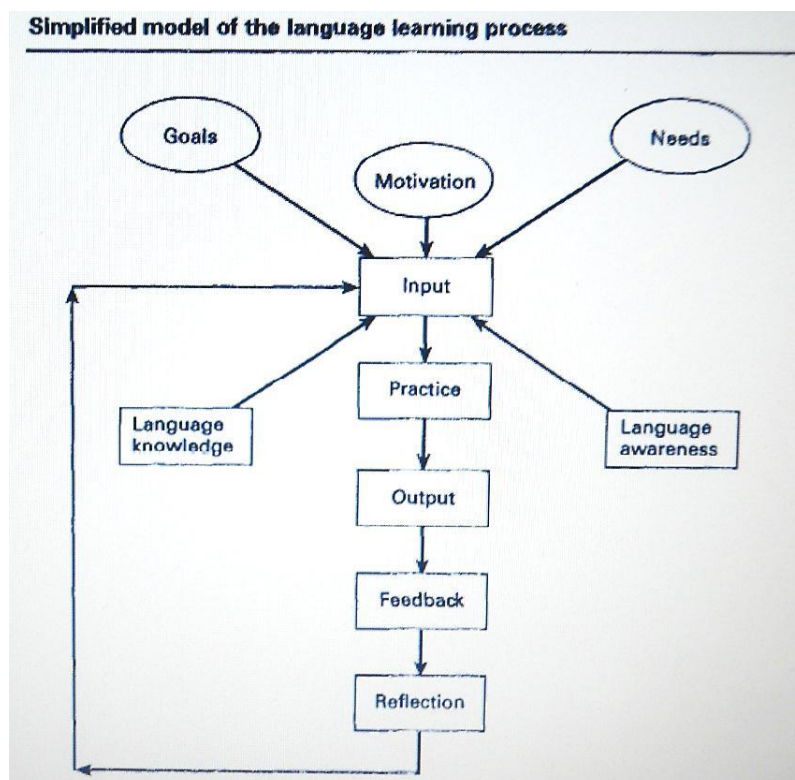


FIGURE 6.1 Model of the language learning process (Cotterall 2000, p. 113)

6.2.2.3 Teaching Style Framework

Mariani (1997) recommends a "teaching style" framework based on the quantity and quality of *challenge* and *support* teachers provide. According to him the way these two dimensions interact with each other helps to produce individual and distinctive teaching style. Combining these two dimensions he presents a framework of four basic types of challenge/support patterns which he further discusses in terms of teacher's behaviour and students' reactions: *high support - high challenge*, *high challenge - low support*, *low support - low challenge* and *low challenge - high support*. According to him the balance between support and challenge is a constant process of decision-making on part of a teacher and the students. He (ibid.) highlights an important feature of the challenge/support framework, which is flexibility according to the changing conditions of work. The framework is implemented in the scheme illustrated in Figure 2.

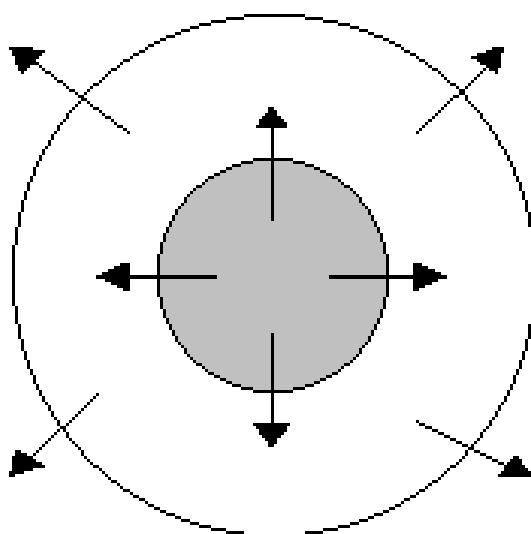


FIGURE 6.2 Teaching Style Framework (van Lier 1996, p. 190)

The "inner circle" refers to what learners already know and can do (familiar territory/ actual stage of development). The space beyond the outer circle represents unfamiliar territory (knowledge and skills learners have not acquired yet). The "outer circle" represents a bridge between the familiar (the inner circle) and the unfamiliar (beyond the outer circle). According to Mariani (ibid.) learning can take place only within the outer circle. Learning within the inner circle has already taken place, learning beyond the outer circle cannot take place. Promoting autonomy in this structure means working within the outer circle and towards the borders of it. If the teacher works inwards, he/she fosters dependence; if the teacher works outwards, he/she fosters autonomy. The balance between *support* and *challenge* is done through *scaffolding* - building a structure round learners who are in the process of learning, and removing it when they can progress in the learning process independently. Mariani provides also a sample questionnaire for surveying support vs. challenge in classroom interaction together with scoring instructions which is available online - for the link see Recommended Reading.

6.2.2.4 Framework based on Stages in the Development of Learner Autonomy

Finally, Reinders (2010) introduces a framework starting from the learners and their actions which can be encouraged, modelled and monitored by the teacher. The model runs through eight stages: *identifying needs*, *setting goals*, *planning learning*, *selecting resources*, *selecting learning strategies*, *practice*, *monitoring progress*, *assessment and revision*. Figure 3 shows these eight stages in form of a cycle grounded in students' reflection, motivation, and their interaction.

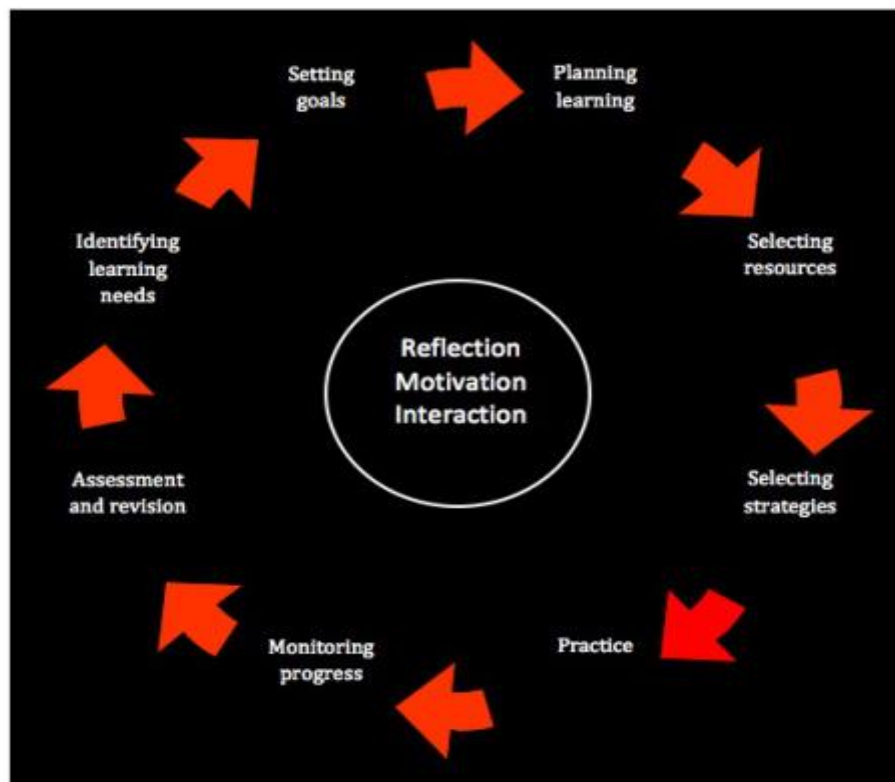


FIGURE 6.3 Stages in the development of learner autonomy (Reinders and Balcikanli 2011, p. 20)

Reinders (2010, pp. 46-49) suggests comprehensively how the stages can be implemented in the classroom learning. His recommendations are summarized briefly in the following paragraphs:

- For *identifying needs* an extensive needs analysis should be conducted in the first weeks of the course and the teacher should encourage students to share their findings with others. Classroom activities should be linked to the identified needs and students asked to reflect on their success in completing them. The language and learning needs should be recorded (e.g. in a learning diary or portfolio) and reviewed regularly.
- *Planning learning* involves making practical plans and allocating time to them. Students should be encouraged to make decisions on classroom practice (content

and activities; the order of the content and the activities; the ways in which learners are expected to participate and interact) for themselves.

- *Selecting resources* students can be asked to find authentic materials from outside the school to be used in the classroom. Finding, producing and sharing materials could be classified as tasks.
- *Selecting learning strategies* is connected to making decisions how activities are to be completed. Students should be able to choose strategies appropriate to the given task. They should be also informed about the basic division of learning strategies into *cognitive*, *metacognitive* and *social-affective* strategies. A good starting point is to ask students to identify their current strategy use. For this purpose a number of different standardized strategy inventories are available on line. For the list of references on strategy inventories see Horváthová (2013).
- For *practice* materials and activities students should be encouraged to incorporate new knowledge into their lives. The challenge is to find a balance between giving students freedom, while still giving them support. This support can be in the form of carefully-structured tasks that require students to practise the language on their own, but then to input their experiences back into the task itself.
- *Monitoring progress* means that students need to develop the ability to monitor their own progress and revise their learning plans accordingly. This includes mainly reflection on their motivation and other social-affective aspects (problems and successes) of the learning (learning diaries in the form of a learning blog encourage this process).
- *Assessment and revision* means that students need to be given opportunities for alternative assessment additionally to achievement and test scores. Portfolios can be used for this purpose: e.g. the European Language Portfolio available as a free download (www.coe.int/portfolio). More recent are on-line tools, such as Ning (www.ning.com) and Eduspaces (www.eduspaces.com), or Web 2.0' applications. Besides portfolios other options such as self-assessment worksheets and activities that encourage students to put into practice what they have learned, can be applied.

The stages of autonomous learning mentioned above are held together *by reflection, motivation/self-motivation* and *interaction* which provide the cognitive, affective and social backbone of a course aimed at fostering learner autonomy.

The scholars and researchers involved in theoretical issues and in practical implementation of the frameworks, approaches and principles mentioned above express several common observations related to putting learner autonomy in practice. All of them agree upon the fact that developing autonomy is a *lengthy process* and its successful implementation depends on the *persistence of the teacher*. They further report that students are frequently surprised when asked to take on a more active role or to express their own views and roles in the learning process. Therefore it is considered crucial not to do any sudden and abrupt changes in teaching approach, but to begin with a *clear rationale* for any modification in the classroom. As with any other task, students need a

clear and meaningful purpose for what they should do. The teacher should then continue slowly by occasionally devoting some time to modelling one of the skills in the framework. Only when students get used to “these breaks from regular classroom teaching” (Reinders 2010, p. 52), teacher can gradually move toward implementing the entire framework.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the chapter is to present the central features of learner and teacher autonomy. The chapter consists of two parts. Drawing on the most important scholars and their research in this field, the history and importance of learner autonomy, its comprehensible definition and components, as well as teacher and learner roles are introduced in the first section. A considerable attention is also paid to the fact that autonomy has to be understood as a step by step process which consists of several phases, stages or levels. Further on, the ability to make informed decision and choices is highlighted as the core of the learner autonomy.

The second part of the chapter discusses information concerning the difference between two contrasting learning contexts: *independent learning* (outside the full-time educational system) and *classroom learning* (within the educational system) and their relationship to autonomy. Afterwards, four frameworks for successful implementing of autonomy in classroom learning are examined in more detail. As the vital elements of putting learner autonomy into practice are emphasized: *scaffolding*, *regular reflection*, *motivation/self-motivation*, *interaction* and *the persistence of the teacher*.

QUESTIONS

1. Try to give your own feasible definition of the term “autonomy”.
2. Name the arguments for autonomy as they are given by Little and Cotterall.
3. The essential piece of information about autonomy is the fact that autonomy is a process. Based on this, in which three ways does Oxford describe the notion of autonomy?
4. What are the most important decision an autonomous learner should be able to make according to Holec and Oxford?
5. Which abilities should learners acquire in foreign language learning according to Littlewood?
6. Which of the frameworks for implementing autonomy in classroom learning (described in subchapter 2.2) do you find most workable? Give reasons.
7. Choose one of the frameworks and try to design your own course or at least several lessons.

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