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Self-motivated learners: the importance of fostering autonomous learning skills in ESL students

Важливість підтримки розвитку автономії студента під час вивчення іноземної мови

***Summary.** Over recent years the concept of autonomous learning has gained increased importance. The objective of this study was to explore the attitudes toward learner autonomy. 52 ESL students (27 men and 25 women) of engineering majors of the Igor Sikorsky National Technical University of Ukraine participated in the survey. The authors aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their autonomous learning skills and how they evaluate the readiness for autonomous learning. Collected data would allow to determine*

more effective strategies for encouraging independent and motivated learning among ESL students in the future. The survey concluded that students are willing to develop good autonomous learning skills that will make them feel capable of learning new knowledge and setting more challenging future goals. It should be noted that such readiness shows how open the participants are to new requests from society. People with developed critical thinking and independent decision-making skills are needed, which in turn is a key to the successful development of society. It was outlined that student autonomy needs to be supported and developed to increase awareness of full autonomy as students move beyond the classroom and take full responsibility for their own learning. This explains the importance of the role of a teacher in formation of students' self-directedness and autonomy, focusing on their own requirements and needs. Most of the students at the beginning of the learning process cannot find out which learning skills they need to master, so the teacher's task is to motivate students to work independently on self-improvement. The authors emphasized that the university's ESL teachers should constantly work on finding and implementing approaches that focus on skill development and aimed to foster intrinsic motivation in students, which can be a powerful force in overcoming many barriers to independent, self-directed lifelong learning.

Key words: language learning, learner autonomy, autonomy formation, learning strategies, learners' motivation, autonomous learning skills, self-assessment, self-control.

Анотація. За останні роки концепція автономного навчання набула все більшого значення. Метою цього дослідження було вивчити ставлення студентів до автономного навчання. В опитуванні взяли участь 52 студенти (27 чоловіків та 25 жінок) інженерних спеціальностей Національного технічного університету України імені Ігоря Сікорського. Автори статті мали на меті дослідити сприйняття студентами своїх навичок та готовності до автономного навчання. Зібрані дані дозволять визначити більш ефективні стратегії, які сприятимуть заохоченню студентів до автономного вивчення мови у майбутньому. Результати опитування показали, що студенти готові розвивати навички автономного навчання, які дозволять їм відчувати себе здатними засвоювати нові знання та ставити більш складні цілі у майбутньому. Слід зазначити, що така готовність свідчить про те, наскільки учасники відкриті до нових викликів суспільства. Сучасному суспільству потрібні люди з розвиненим критичним мисленням та навичками самостійного прийняття рішень, що в свою чергу є запорукою успішного розвитку суспільства. Було підкреслено, що студентську автономію необхідно підтримувати та розвивати шляхом підвищення усвідомлення концепції «повної автономії», оскільки студенти виходять за межі аудиторії та беруть на себе повну відповідальність за власне навчання. Цим пояснюється важливість ролі викладача у формуванні у студентів самоспрямованості та самостійності, орієнтації на власні вимоги та потреби. Більшість студентів на початок навчального процесу не можуть визначити, якими навичкам навчання їм необхідно оволодіти, тому завдання викладача полягає в тому, щоб спонукати студентів до самостійної роботи над самовдосконаленням. Автори наголошують, що викладачі англійської мови

в університеті повинні постійно працювати над пошуком і впровадженням підходів, які зосереджені на розвитку навичок і спрямовані на виховання внутрішньої мотивації у студентів, яка може стати потужною силою у подоланні багатьох бар'єрів для самостійного навчання впродовж життя.

Ключові слова: *вивчення мови, автономія студента, формування автономії, стратегії навчання, мотивація студентів, навички автономного навчання, самооцінка, самоконтроль.*

Introduction. Today teaching and learning strategies and methods are evolving rapidly due to the appeal of new tendencies, technologies which can create a wide range of opportunities for both teachers and students to provide and obtain knowledge. In addition, there is a necessity to meet the demands of modern society for learning throughout life. Modern technologies provide great opportunities for ESL teachers to employ alternative methods and approaches to teaching a second language. In turn, students also have unlimited avenues to learn a foreign language inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, the main challenges for language teachers are to support the development of students' independence and equip them with the skills required for effective self-directed, independent or autonomous learning. The term "autonomy" comes from the Greek word "αὐτονομία" (autonomia), which means "self-governance" or "independence", and is composed of the parts "αὐτός" (autos) – "self" and "νόμος" (nomos) – "law". Autonomy can apply to various domains, including technology, psychology, ethics, learning and more, and it often involves a degree of self-direction and self-regulation.

In the article we focus on the term "autonomy" in the context of language learning. The most general definition describes "learning autonomy" as the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning. P. Candy [2] defines independent learning as a process, a method and a philosophy of education in which a student acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation. L. Dam [3] also sees autonomy in terms of creating an atmosphere conducive to learning within the confines of the educational system where learners are given the possibility to be consciously involved in their own learning. Autonomous learning has a significant impact on the process of learning a second foreign language. This approach contributes to a more effective and deep assimilation of language material, the development of skills and an increase in motivation. Self-study allows to choose topics that interest, to choose the time and place of study depending on the schedule and circumstances. Independent learning is characterized by active study of language material, independent consideration of rules, grammar and vocabulary. This contributes to a deep understanding of language structures. Self-directed learning helps to develop planning, organization, and

self-control skills. A great number of scientists studied the potential, challenges and opportunities of fostering learner autonomy and self-access. A. A. Hussein and Z. Idrees [5] supported the idea that the success in the in developing students' autonomous language learning fully depends on the techniques and activities that language teachers adopt and implement during the lesson. They concluded that teachers must facilitate learners' acquisition of good linguistic background and communicative proficiency by developing learners' awareness of the importance of working on their own and probing and solving the problematic issues inside and outside the classroom setting. H. Lankiewicz and M. Pree [7; 10] explored the integration of technology in language learning. Their research highlights the role of personalized learning platforms, AI-based applications, and adaptive algorithms. These tools promote personalized learning, allowing students to progress at their own pace with real-time feedback. As technology advances and our understanding of language learning deepens, autonomous learning is poised to empower students on their journey to mastering English as a second language.

Methodology/Methods. The purpose of the paper was to explore the concept of learner autonomy in the context of studying languages and find out the students' views on independent study and evaluate their readiness for this approach to learning. To gain a deeper understanding of the problem it was crucial to investigate and evaluate students' awareness of the characteristics of an autonomous student, as well as conditions that will foster the development of skills and competencies necessary for educational autonomy formation. The study reported here sought to analyse data collected in current research and discuss the results of numerous studies carried out in this field in order to develop in the future adequate and more efficient strategies aimed to encourage ESL students to self-directed and self-motivated learning. In pursuit of this objective, the following tasks must be executed: 1) to establish and analyse students' perception of autonomy learning from different angles with the help of a survey; 2) to outline recommendations to teachers of English on how to stimulate students' interest and motivation for autonomous learning, empowering them to become self-directed and lifelong learners. In the study, we hypothesize that ESL students are aware of the prominent demand of the globalized world to carry out self-education and self-improvement in various domains. However, at the same time, they feel a lack of motivation at university to gain knowledge by themselves and don't possess those skills and abilities which allow them to become independent learners. 52 ESL students (27 men and 25 women) obtaining a degree in engineering at a technical university in Ukraine were interviewed regarding to their perceptions and experiences of autonomy learning. The survey consisted of three kinds of prompts: multiple choice (prompts 1, 2, 3, 6, 7), a Likert scale

(prompts 4, 5, 10, 11) was used to measure respondents' agreement/value). The qualitative analysis of the results obtained from a survey was employed in order to gain insights into how students perceive their level of self-directedness, define the factors that influence their motivation for autonomous learning, and analyse the role of autonomy on students' academic performance and learning outcomes. To measure central tendency, we calculated the median (Mdn) and to show the spread of the responses we calculated the Interquartile Range (IQR) for the prompts which used a Likert scale. This research complies with ethics, all respondents volunteered to participate in the survey and gave their consent.

Results and discussions. According to the results of the survey, most of the participants (53%) were students who have been studying English in the time interval of 5–10 years. There is a significant number of students (31%) who have been engaged in language studying for more than 10 years. This information allows us to conclude that we deal with experienced learners. Thus, they have some background knowledge with the understanding of possession of those skills and abilities that are necessary to achieve their educational goals (Figure 1).

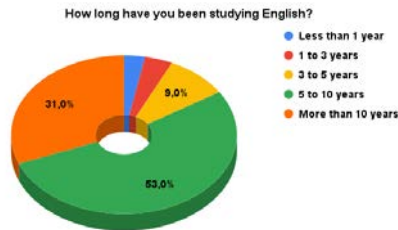


Fig. 1. Length of study English by the participants

More than half of the respondents (54%) were males and slightly over one-third of them (36%) were females.

To promote learners' autonomy ESL teachers should emphasize for their students that the process of language acquisition can't be stopped at the language lessons and a classroom can't be viewed as the sole setting where such a process takes place. We investigated students' readiness to study language and develop their language skills outside the classroom. It was crucial for us to understand whether they are ready to share responsibility for their learning and continue their work on language acquisition independently.

The results of the study showed that most of the students expressed their agreement (35%) and slightly less indicated strong agreement (23%)

with the statement that learners must work within and beyond the classroom to develop their language skills (Mdn =2, IQR = 2) (See Table 1). However, the findings of the survey discovered that a significant number of students disagreed (19%) or strongly disagreed (12%) with the necessity to find ways to obtain knowledge beyond the classroom. These figures demonstrate that there are a lot of students who aren't actively involved in the learning process and need a special participation from teachers who will help them formulate and further pursue their educational goals. Only after this it is possible to discuss whether students are prepared for autonomous learning or not.

Table 1

Questions of the survey based on the Likert scale

| Survey prompts | strongly agree | agree | undecided | disagree | strongly disagree | Mdn | IQR |
|---|----------------|--------------|-----------|------------------|-------------------|-----|-----|
| Prompt 4. To what extent do you agree with the statement that “Learners have to work within and beyond the classroom to develop their language skills”? | 23 | 35 | 11 | 19 | 12 | 2 | 2 |
| | high | moderate | low | none | | | |
| Prompt 5. How can you evaluate your awareness of the term “learner autonomy”? | 20 | 46 | 25 | 9 | | 2 | 1 |
| | fully ready | mostly ready | neutral | somewhat ready | not ready | | |
| Prompt 10. Rate your readiness for autonomy learning | 25 | 50 | 11 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 0,5 |
| | very willing | willing | neutral | somewhat willing | not willing | | |
| Prompt 11. Indicate your level of willingness to improve the current situation with your readiness for autonomy learning: | 51 | 32 | 9 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 |

The calculation of the median (Mdn) and the Interquartile range (IQR) shows that most of the respondents (46%) evaluate their awareness of the term “learner autonomy” as moderate. At the same time the obtained data from the survey shows that rather high percent of respondents (25%) defined their level of awareness as low (See Table 1). This fact confirms the necessity and importance to promote the principles of autonomous learning among ESL students. Thus, teachers should find and implement various teaching approaches which will have a focus on the development of skills for independent learning in ESL students.

Regarding the most preferred definition of the term “learner autonomy” approximately half of the respondents (49%) chose that one which demands from students to assume control for their learning. It asserts the fact that they must be ready to build responsibility through goal setting, learning activities, and assessment. Slightly less than a half of the participants (35%) see autonomy as a recognition of rights of learners within educational system (Figure 2). Accepting this definition of autonomy, students consider it as an opportunity for realization of students’ right to high-quality and affordable education. In this context student autonomy is regarded as an essential tool for developing students’ motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement.

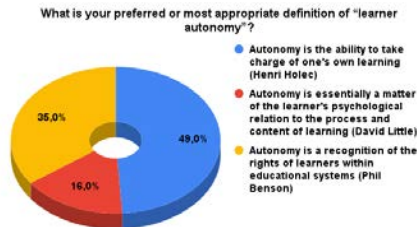


Fig. 2. The most appropriate definition of the term “learner autonomy”

The seventh next prompt of the survey concerned the goals of learning autonomy. Most of the students (32%) pointed out the increase active participation in learning activities as the most important goal. For slightly less than 30% of the respondents the increase student motivation appeared to be the most important factor promoting learning autonomy (Figure 3).

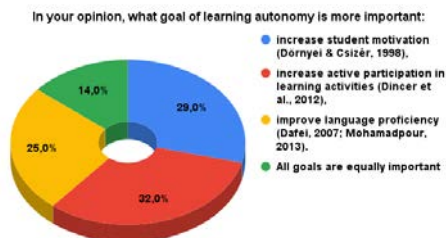


Fig. 3. Opinions of respondents on the most important goals of learning autonomy

It coincides with the idea of V. B. Manzano [9] who considers a language a social activity in which interaction, communication and interdependence are essential for the learning process. Deep understanding of the concept of learning autonomy and the main principles of it will assure the success of students in pursuing their learning objectives as they take responsibility for both their individual learning and learning in a group. It plays a crucial role in formation of independence of students as the main quality of new generation of graduates.

Before we can comment on the eighth question, it is highly recommended to highlight some characteristics of Autonomous learners given by different scientists. D. Little [8] stated that “Autonomous learners are characterized by their ability to set personal learning goals, manage their time effectively, and independently choose the most appropriate learning strategies”. T. Hedge [4] characterized autonomous learners as those who know their needs and work productively with the teacher towards the achievement of their objectives, learn both inside and outside the classroom, can take classroom-based material and can build on it.

The findings of the survey showed that most of the participants (32%) believe that the most indicative characteristic of an autonomous learner is the ability to have insight into the learning style and strategies (Figure 4).

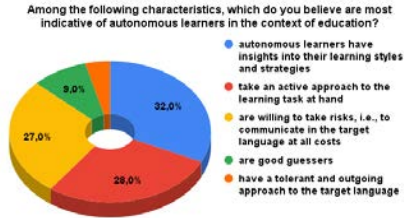


Fig. 4. Opinions of respondents on the most indicative characteristics of autonomous learners

It confirms the concept that only in the case when a student can determine his/her own learning approaches and together with the teacher coordinate efforts in language acquisition it is possible to say about the process of cultivation of independence in students. P. Benson [1] claimed that in second language education Learner Autonomy involves second language learners gaining awareness of their own ways of learning such as learning styles and learning strategies, so that they can utilize their strengths and work on their weaknesses. According to C. King [6], intrinsic motivation, the ability to select personal goals, self-discipline, the ability to self-assess, and metacognitive skills are key characteristics of self-directed learners. It should be mentioned that a significant number of students (28%) emphasized on taking an active approach that takes them beyond the role of passive listener and note taker and allows the student to take some direction and initiative during the class thus enabling them to take responsibility.

The ninth question about the most challenging aspects of becoming an autonomous student display that most respondents (37%) find setting own objectives as the most difficult task for them, whereas approximately the same number of participants of the survey indicated selecting learning activities (25%) and monitoring progress (22%) (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Opinions of the respondents on the most challenging aspects of becoming an autonomous student

The answers to the question number 10 aimed to determine the level of readiness of ESL students to learn independently out of the classroom show that most of them (50%) are mostly ready for autonomous learning, whereas the number of those who fully ready constitutes only 25% (Mdn=2, IQR=0.5) (See table 1). Such small present is impressive. It is a sign that ESL teachers should constantly think how to find and implement approaches which must be focused on the development of skills and aimed to facilitate intrinsic motivation in students which can be a powerful force in overcoming the many barriers to self-directed, self-generated, autonomous lifelong learning.

The majority of “very willing” (51%) answers to the question number 11 about the willingness to their capability for autonomous learning reflects positive attitude of students to this concept (Mdn=1, IQR=1) (See table 1). It depicts their desire to obtain good autonomous learning abilities with which they will feel capable of learning new skills and setting more challenging future goals. It is necessary to mention that this readiness demonstrates to what extend the participants are open to new demands of the society for people with well-developed critical thinking and independent decision-making skills are required.

Conclusion. The study emphasized the importance of the role of students' autonomy in the process of learning a second language and aimed to study how this autonomy can be supported and developed. This concept of autonomy assumes that students should be active participants in their own learning process, able to independently plan, manage and evaluate their learning. Independent study also gives students the opportunity to further explore topics of interest to them and develop a deeper understanding of the material. However, the results of the survey revealed the fact that some students may feel the need for supervision of teachers, as independent learning requires a high level of internal motivation, organizational skills and self-discipline. Other students may be more open to independent learning, feeling more confident

in their own abilities and able to plan and manage their own learning. Thus, the concept of student autonomy in language learning reflects an important transition from the traditional approach to education to more active, individualized learning. Although students' attitudes and readiness for independent learning may vary, it is important to create a supportive learning environment that supports them in developing this important skill. Self-study contributes to the immersion learning of the material, the development of critical thinking skills and increases the motivation of students. Students' proactive participation in their own learning helps create a deeper connection with the language and culture they are learning. It is important that teachers act as partners in this process, supporting and guiding the development of student autonomy. They can provide resources, encourage independent work, facilitate discussion and provide feedback. Expanding learning approaches that promote independence opens new opportunities for students for personal growth and lifelong learning.

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