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DEVELOPING THE LEARNER’S AUTONOMY THROUGH LISTENING ACTIVITIES

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Rezumat. *Conceptul de autonomie a studentului se referă la capacitatea de a prelua controlul învățării, este un termen educațional transformator care se bazează pe ideea de a face ceva și de a face ceva bine. Factorii cheie care duc la transformarea pozitivă a procesului de învățare sunt motivația intrinsecă, statutul și modul în care acționează profesorul, strategiile de învățare aplicate și contextul dezvoltării acesteia. Oferirea elevilor mai multă implicare în planificarea procesului de învățare îi va determina ulterior să depună eforturi în propria învățare, să aibă putere și control asupra propriei lor învățări, mai degrabă decât să finalizeze o sarcină stabilită sau o serie de sarcini. Dezvoltarea abilităților de ascultare este un proces de lungă durată. Activitățile de ascultare extinse, care sunt concepute pentru o mai lungă perioadă de timp și presupun o metodologie bine structurată, în conformitate cu principiile autonomiei studentului, vor avea un impact semnificativ asupra comportamentului de învățare și rezultate academice ale elevilor.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *autonomia elevului, motivație intrinsecă, profesor, abilități de ascultare, proces de învățare.*

Abstract. *Learner`s autonomy is the ability to take charge of learning, it is a transformative educational term that is based on the idea of doing something and doing something well. The key factors that lead to positive transformation of the learning process are intrinsic motivation, the way teacher`s is acting, applied strategies and the context of its development. Giving students more ownership of their learning drives students to put effort themselves into their own learning, to have power and control over their own learning (agency) rather than completing a set task/series of tasks. Developing listening skills is a long lasting process. Extended listening activities that are designed for whole term and suppose well-structured methodology, planned according to learner`s autonomy principles will have a huge impact on students learning behavior and learning outcomes.*

Keywords: *learner`s autonomy, intrinsic motivation, strategies, teacher, listening skills, learning process.*

Lerner`s autonomy is an issue that made more teachers to agree that its presence should be more often in our teaching conceptualization. Pandemic teaching experience highlighted the necessity of the notion in the school teaching learning design. The wide meaning of the term is denoting how the learner is taking responsibility for learning. Different scientists define it in different ways saying the same. For example, Holec says that “Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one`s own learning”. He claimed that an autonomous language learner could control his learning situation by setting his learning objectives, constructing the content to be learned and its progress, choosing the method and techniques to be applied, monitoring the learning process, and determining the evaluation. [2], “Autonomy is a capacity-for detachment, critical reflection decision-making, and independent work” affirms Little. He proposed a little bit different definition, although it brings a similar sense implicitly. It was stated that autonomy by itself is a capacity to detach, make a critical reflection and decisions, and take independent action [6].

David Nunan spoke in his studies about learner autonomy's, as well. He extended the research of learner`s autonomy to the notion of level and version of autonomy. Nunan (as cited in Chitashvili, introduced the five levels of autonomy that refer to the learner actions comprising *awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence* [5].

Awareness-students are aware of their learning objectives and the content they are learning. They can identify the learning strategy applied and identify their preferred learning styles/ strategies.

Involvement-students are involved in choosing their objectives from a range of options offered, they select choices from the options.

Intervention-besides being involved in selecting choices, students are also invited to modify and adapt the learning goals and the content. Students modify and adapt the tasks.

Creation-students make initiatives to create their learning objectives, they can create tasks that suit their learning objectives.

Transcendence-students can go beyond the classroom and connect the content of researchers, the classroom, and the world beyond, they become teachers and researchers.

The experience of blended learning use during the pandemic situation proved teachers once again how important is to operate some changes in our educational system. One of these is the need of developing learner`s autonomy. Interviewing teachers during continuous professional development courses about the recent teaching experience the most fears and hopes were related to learners` motivation, responsibility and the level of mastering the knowledge and skills before moving on to the next. As a result, from long teachers` reflections has been concluded that blended learning can be the right teaching learning style that would create an adequate learning environment capable to develop learner`s autonomy. Asking teachers about the level of autonomy their students possess, the most of them 68 %, answered that a few of them are autonomous.

On the contrary, it was curious to find out that 10-th grade students want more learning autonomy, they are more likely to be self-motivated having possibility to co-construct the map of their learning activity. Students like to have freedom to make their own decisions, they doubt some learning content and speak about the level of usefulness of some components of the course and all would like “to choose what they want or are interested in”. This is justified by the so-called in psychology of personal constructs, elaborated by the American Psychologist G. Kelly [2]. According to his theory people have expectations of what will happen in given circumstances; and our lives are a continuous process of hypothesis-testing and theory-revision as we attempt to make sense of the world around us.

“Construct” to refer to the way a person anticipates events and so makes sense and takes control of the world surrounding them.

Finally, interviewing the students was quite obvious the students` readiness to become co-partners in designing the learning process. Learners autonomy is that very change, that can produce a positive learning behavior especially in lyceum level.

Speaking deeply about principles and factors that contribute to learner`s autonomy increase is important to have a brief look through some advantages of blended learning approach, involvement in the teaching learning process.

Blended learning has two key features that characterize it as an approach, so they are as follows: personalized learning and competency based learning. Blended learning is a learner centered education and aims to create more individualized learning experience with more interactive learning environment. All learning situations suppose readjusting learning context to an individual learner needs so to help each pupil to succeed, as it is known that pupils learn at different paces, possess different background and have different interests that challenge their learning. Many researchers came to the idea that effective personalized learning needs continuous monitoring and adjustment of individual student learning pathways. Through the ongoing analysis of student performance data, teachers and administrators can adjust or “re-architect” student learning experiences based on the changing needs of each student. In this context, the learner becomes an active participant in the process of learning environment adjustment. Blended learning promotes this combination and the learner`s autonomy is an imperative of efficient implementation of this teaching learning approach.

Teachers can help learners become responsible for their learning by listening to each learner`s voice, identifying their real needs, and building a qualitative partnership in designing learning content. According to many researchers, high-impact practices demand a well-designed process that involves specific principles and strategies to fundamentally reshape the relationship that is currently established between teachers and students. The partnership between the teacher

and the student in designing the learning content will increase the student's engagement, motivation and lead to a positive outcome.

The key factor that is the root of positive transformation in this context is intrinsic motivation. Motivation is a person's desire and reason for doing something and doing something well. Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have the potential to influence student involvement into learning activity but intrinsic nowadays is seen as being the main in within today's educational contexts of improving and accelerating achievement. Giving students more ownership of their learning drives students to put effort themselves into their own learning, to have power and control over their own learning (agency) rather than completing a set task/series of tasks. This type of learning experience emphasis intrinsic motivation. In the context of learning environment, intrinsic motivation is influenced by a set of beliefs and self-perceptions students develop in the classroom (Jang, Conradi, McKenna, & Jones, 2015) [4]. The sphere of intrinsic motivation includes: attitude and awareness interest, relevance and curiosity, value, self-concept, self-efficacy, goal setting and goal reaching (fig. 1).

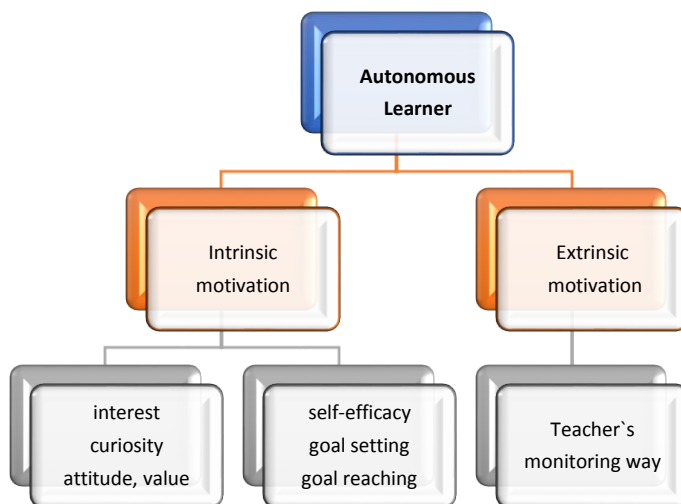


Fig. 1. The sphere of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that move the autonomous learner.

The role of teacher in developing learner's autonomy was highlighted by many studies. Teachers are responsible for the level of autonomy students have. The level of autonomy students has, mainly depends on the strategies teachers use while teaching or designing their teaching learning process. Ellis and Sinclair outline the teachers can play an instrumental role in learner training by [3]:

- Negotiating with learners about course content and methodology, if appropriate.
- Sharing with learners in a way that is accessible to them, the kind of information about language. and language learning that can teachers have but that is not always passed on to learners.
- Encouraging discussion in the classroom about language and language learning.
- Helping learners become aware of the wide range of alternative strategies available to them for language learning.

- Allowing learners to form their own views about language learning, and respecting their points of view.

- Counselling and giving guidance to individual learners when possible.

Later, we see how the concept of learner`s autonomy changed and the teacher`s role as well. To increase the learner`s involvement in the learning process Dörnyei also lists some tips what teachers can do to promote learner autonomy in classes [4]:

- allow learners choices;
- give students positions of genuine authority;
- encourage student contributions and peer teaching;
- encourage project work, task based work;
- when appropriate, allow learners to use self-assessment procedures.

Teacher of foreign language were traditionally seen as knowledge givers who dominate the group of pupils from start to end. However, speaking about modern teaching, pupils needs and autonomy development the teacher`s role changes a lot. The teacher has to choose appropriate methods to increase student`s autonomy. Lin and Reinders said that the teacher is evaluated based on the amount of knowledge that the teacher can transfer to the students. Also, teachers should build a supportive relationship based on structured guidance, which allows them to recognize the trails their students` shadow, the difficulties they come across, and support that they need “the role of the teacher is to carefully and responsively scaffold attempts by the learner to take control of their learning decisions and performance in the second language” (p. 672) [5]. In conclusion, teachers have an important role in guiding students through the practice of self-assessment, goal-setting, training, observing, and evaluating their language learning.

So, autonomous learning transforms the teacher into:

(a) the facilitator—someone who can be the psychosocial provider, technical worker, motivator, and guide to assist the learners in overcoming their difficulties;

(b) director and organizer—someone who can organize different activities and games that meet the learners` desires and expectations;

(c) counselor—someone who can reduce anxiety by advising the individual learners on how to achieve more effective learning outcomes.

Starting from early age learners must be equipped with needed or right strategies, that will lead later to a more autonomous learner. Based on different researcher point of view was found out that positive, interactive learning environment are very important for learner`s autonomy. Of course the right strategies can contribute to the development of the needed environment. According to researchers` point of view and teachers experience, task based, inquiry and project work activities can be good start learner`s autonomy development.

In conclusion, learner`s autonomy becomes an essential element in the context of teaching a foreign language in future. There are some key components that play a great role in the efficient outcome. Intrinsic motivation, form of delivering the teaching learning process-blended learning, learning strategies and life-long learning skills are those if designed correctly will help us teachers to develop learner`s autonomy (fig. 2).

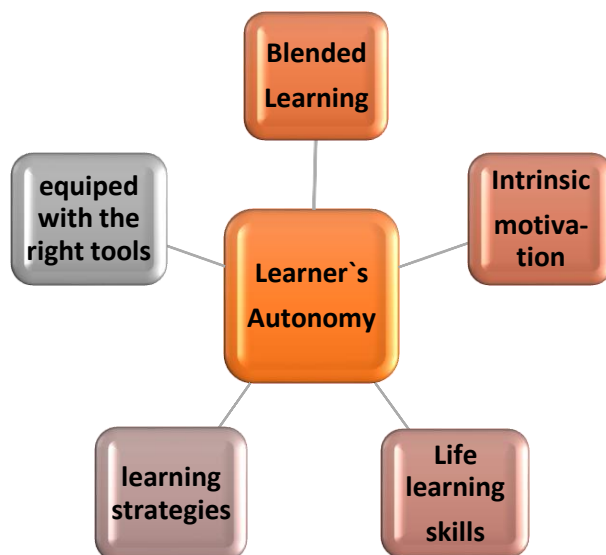


Fig. 2. Key elements to develop learner`s autonomy.

In developing listening skills in a foreign language, the teachers should orientate students to gradually move from state of dependence on a teacher to a state of autonomy possible in particular circumstances. Online learning shown us how important is learner`s autonomy. Developing listening skills in a foreign language is a long complex process. Students need to use a variety of content, tools to develop their listening skills. Classroom activities are limited and not enough to become proficient in a foreign language. Undoubtedly, specific strategies, actions, tools used by the teacher and learner make listening process easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and finally more productive. Obviously, teachers should be enough skilled to choose the right strategy and tolls to facilitate learners` autonomy.

Dornyei proposed the elimination of the term “strategies” and replacing it with “self-regulation”.

Pinch was the first scholar who defined the term “self-regulating” presenting it as an active and constructing process. During this process students create learning aims, manage, organize and supervise their learning. They learn how to identify their learning needs and establish goals. The most strategies involve a wide range of learning dimensions like self-efficacy, self-efficiency, metacognitive and cognitive strategies, motivational and emotional factors and learners’ beliefs [4].

A language learning strategy is a deliberate, goal-oriented action plan that a learner employs to control, regulate, and enhance his or her language learning, says Oxford (as cited in Matthews

Kelly, 2016). The choice of appropriate strategy will make the learning of foreign language more efficient, enjoyable and develop students` personality traits that needs a digital learner to face 21-st century challenges. Among the most salient categories of language learning strategies are cognitive strategies for analyzing, synthesizing and reasoning; metacognitive strategies for managing and controlling the learning cycle (planning, organizing, monitoring and evaluating); and affective and social strategies for dealing with emotional, motivational and interpersonal sides of language learning. Some effective examples that lead to both learning aims can be as follows:

- listening/reading journals-intensive and extensive approach to listening and reading;
- classroom projects;
- extensive writing activities (creative writing);
- the use self-reference tools such as English-Romanian, English-English dictionaries and grammar books.

Listening/reading journals can be a formative strategy that facilitates the development of language skills and an autonomous learners allowing them to enhance ownership in learning within a productive learning environment. The teacher has to set up very attentively all steps of the work methodology. This chain of activities must be long lasting to bring established expectations. According to the above discussed aspects the following stages must be considered in setting up the listening/reading journal strategy. Students are helped and monitored by the teacher in establishing learning goals (teachers encourage students to set personal learning goals). Deconstruction of learning tasks and co-construction of learning tasks through joint planning of topic and tasks (listen to student interest and choice-topics, difficulty levels) will help students deeply understand the learning actions and their impact on learning process. The variety of digital tools can be sometimes confusing that is why the teacher directs the learner or help to select those that the best will lead to the expected learning outcomes. The intensity of the activity is important as well, so the teacher should agree on schedule, listening/reading actions can take place every day or it might be specific days in a week, how many times should be the text read or listened in order to be focused better on the meaning.

Listening comprehension activities are selected or suggested according to the aimed skills, so, the teacher will suggest the student to perform a variety of plot-listening/reading activities- (completing gap fills and transcriptions, drawing, true/false ex., picking up and learning useful vocabulary). Finally, the students will have the task to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion, extended listening activities can be formative and goal oriented leading us to developing autonomous learners. The right choice of strategies according to the main principles of building learner`s autonomy will enhance student`s linguistic and learning skills transforming the learner into an active, responsible participant.

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