

## **Autonomy in Language Learning**

Dr A.P.Lisnychenko Ed.D., assistant professor of Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky State Pedagogical University (Ukraine), a participant of “New Generation School Teacher” project under the auspices of British Council and Ministry of Education in Ukraine

The central concern of any teacher conducting a lesson is to provide ample opportunities for students to acquire language skills. A teacher introduces a range of learning activities and tasks trying to arouse their interest. But he will hardly succeed if the classroom processes are conventional, that is if he performs a traditional role of a teacher who imparts the information to students, controls and assesses them. Even if a teacher is supportive, friendly and he does not scold students for mistakes, still such a teacher and his students take different positions: the teacher is teaching and the students are taught.

Scientists believe that only in autonomous classroom students are motivated to be active language learners and can be efficient in their learning process. Learner autonomy is considered as a capacity of learners to take charge of their learning and sharing responsibility with a teacher for their learning achievements. This presupposes active involvement of language learners into setting their goals at lessons, selecting learning materials, self and peer assessment, reflection on their progress and language practice outside the classroom.

Having discussed the meaning of the above mentioned notion at our Methodology session, the students agreed that it is urgent to foster learner autonomy in school classrooms to develop pupils' responsibility for their language learning. It was important for me to know they have a positive opinion about learner autonomy, but it was also essential to identify their, intending teachers' level of autonomy in learning. In order to contribute to the development of pupils' autonomy in school classrooms, it is crucial for teachers to behave autonomously.

I suggested the students answering a questionnaire developed by Camilleri (1996). It consisted of 14 questions. The students could answer them choosing from 2 (the lowest score) to 5 (the highest score). 8 questions of the questionnaire were focused on finding out whether the students had features characteristic of an autonomous learner, such as: initiative, self-confident in academic work, cooperative, purposeful, flexible (ready to change, improve skills), reflective. The students' self-evaluation showed their middle or upper middle position (3-4 scores) concerning this. The question “How do you prefer to learn?” intended to identify whether the students were active or passive learners and whether individual or group work appealed to them. It was found out that most of them were active learners, though 21% of the

students preferred passive listening to the teacher to talking to him. 90% of the students chose discussing with students while learning and only 10% - reading on your own. The questionnaire helped us to get to know that the students used widely the resources mentioned in the questionnaire (libraries, a resource center, magazines, audio-visual materials). The other 4 questions were focused on finding out whether the students had ever established their learning goals and carried out self-evaluation. It appeared that the students didn't have the habit of setting their goals. They ticked the score 1 in their questionnaire. Neither had they much experience in self-evaluation. Meanwhile the ability to set learning goals and reflect on one's own progress or failures in learning are the basic principles and conditions of learner autonomy.

Thus, it was important for us not only to ensure students' understanding of learner autonomy as a special self-directed style of learning/learner-centered teaching, but also to enable students' acquisition of the abilities to set goals and reflect on their progress at our sessions. So, our every session included the involvement of the students into setting objectives and their reflection on the knowledge and abilities they have acquired by the end of the session.

Scientists state that setting goals is an inborn ability of a person, but it is developed to a different degree in different people. Thus, it is the function of a teacher to develop it. It is not advisable for a teacher only to inform students about the objectives of a lesson. They should be actively involved in goal setting. If students are inexperienced in goal setting, the teacher can, for beginning, suggest students choosing from his list of goals those ones they think are relevant, important, interesting to achieve or suggest their own goals. The teacher and students negotiate the best goals to choose. If students have some experience in goal setting the teacher can slowly guide students to setting their goals independently.

For example, at the session devoted to discussing "Autonomy in the classroom", the students were asked to close their eyes, imagine an autonomous classroom and describe what they saw in their pictures. It appeared that the students' pictures of an autonomous classroom were vague, not clear. Actually their autonomous classroom looked like a traditional classroom with a teacher teaching students, imparting to them some information, controlling students' work. Reasonably, that when the students were told that an autonomous classroom differed from their image if it, they wanted to get to know what a teacher and students usually do in autonomous classroom, the peculiarities of autonomous learning. Eliciting different ideas from the students we finally agreed to set such objectives: to be aware of:

- a teacher and students' roles in an autonomous classroom;
- the activities carried out in an autonomous classroom;

- the integral elements of autonomous learning (goal setting, planning, monitoring, evaluation, reflection)

The first activity of the session was devoted to revealing teacher and students' roles in an autonomous classroom, demonstrated in a video. Before watching the video the students were asked to pay attention to the teacher and students' activities in the classroom, while watching the video, and answer the following questions (the questions are reflected on the board):

1. In what kind of activities are the students engaged during the lesson?
2. Are they involved in cooperative work / peer tutoring / peer assessment?
3. What types of documents do the students keep?
4. How does a teacher involve students in decision making?
5. How extended is her TTT (Teacher Talking Time)?

Then the students watched the video "Learner autonomy across the border from theory to practice" by Dorte Asmussen (Youtube), demonstrating an autonomous classroom. After that they were asked to split into groups, share their impressions of the video and answer the highlighted above questions.

Then the students were given the tables with the headings: 1. Teacher roles in autonomous classroom. 2. Students roles in autonomous classroom. 3. Types of documents in an autonomous classroom. The students filled in the tables and let them go round the classroom clockwise until each of the papers came back to its "home" working group. While working with each table they were encouraged to add new ideas.

(Keys: **Teacher's roles:** 1. To organize students' collaborative work. 2. To involve all students into work. 3. To help. 4. To create a friendly atmosphere. **Students' roles/activities:** 1. To participate in group work. 2. To share their home work. 3. To do peer tutoring. 4. To do peer assessment/ self-assessment. 5. To select the learning material. 6. To choose different ways of performing their tasks. 7. To be engaged in decision making. 8. To be engaged in communication. **Documents students keep in an autonomous classroom:** 1. Lodgbooks (extended exercise books where dates, aims, objective and the process of learning are reflected). 2. European Language Portfolio. It contains products of learning. 3. Posters which reflect: a) lessons' aims; objectives; plans; b) ideas; c) things to remember (Dos / Don'ts; rules; d) help (useful expressions; new words).

Then in new groups of 5 each student in a group received a text about an integral part of autonomous learning: goal setting, planning, monitoring, evaluation or reflection. After reading their text the students shared the information they had read with other students of the group. Then they were encouraged to make posters and demonstrate the autonomous learning with its integral parts (goal setting, planning, monitoring, evaluation or reflection) in different schemes, using various images and in the right order. On completing the posters the members of each group were invited to present their creation and discuss them.

The final activity of the session was reflection. The students were asked to sit in a circle, remember the objectives they had set and reflect on the knowledge and the abilities they had acquired at the session. A friendly atmosphere helped them not to feel tense and to be sincere. The students confessed that the model of the autonomous class they saw was completely new for them and they were impressed by the new opportunities for conducting a lesson. Still they expressed their fears about the implementation of autonomous learning in their country. To their mind, in Ukrainian educational system teacher-centered approach prevails and this interferes with facilitating learner autonomy.