The Use of Technology to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

The modern tendencies in EFL reveal the researchers' interest in finding the optimal way of enhancing the students' learning process. Since the shift in the teaching paradigm from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness, many solutions have been offered to make learning motivational and inspiring. This led the researchers to the conclusion that motivation should first of all come from within, thus, making the students responsible for their own learning. The present article examines both the benefits and challenges of autonomous learning. It focuses on the importance of developing autonomy in students who, thus, will be able to take full control of their learning process. Whereas, responsibility enhancement will lead to a better understanding of the studied material.

Keywords: learner autonomy, student-centeredness, CALL, learning style

Introduction

The modern tendencies in EFL reveal the researchers' interest in finding the optimal way of enhancing the students' learning process. Since the shift in the teaching paradigm from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness, many solutions have been offered to make learning motivational and inspiring. This led the researchers to the conclusion that motivation should first of all come from within, thus, making the students responsible for their own learning.

It goes without saying that the teacher still holds an important role in the students' academic development. The human factor is essential when it comes to motivation and encouragement. The teacher in front of the classroom sets, to varying degrees, an example to follow. Definitely, the students have the possibility either to follow it or to reject it. Yet, in the majority of cases, the teacher is the one to motivate and inspire their students to study. He / she should cultivate the desire to learn gradually diminishing his / her influence on the students' progress.

Therefore, the teacher should encourage learner autonomy from the very beginning. The sooner the students are helped to realize the responsibility they have for their own formation as learners the better their learning will proceed. This implies that the teacher should use the techniques that will help attain his / her educational goals.

At the same time, one cannot deny the tremendous impact technology has on our lives. There are fewer and fewer people who have not been influenced, in a way or another, by the technological progress. It has dramatically changed not only our way of living, but also our way of perceiving the reality, especially together with the appearance of internet. The virtual world has become appealing and, sometimes, people get lost in the labyrinth of web links losing the track of time. Young people, i.e. students, are particularly interested in surfing the net.

One should not underestimate the power it has. However, its purpose is not solely to entertain. It abounds in information that can be used in different domains, including the process of learning. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to use technology tools both inside and outside the classroom to create more motivational learning environments. In addition, technology could serve the purpose of enhancing learner autonomy.

Definition of concepts

The process of education is never-ending. Indeed, a person cannot stop at a certain stage of his / her life and say that his/ her education is complete. It is rather an on-going process that makes people strive for improvement and accomplishment, if they want to become acclaimed specialists. Thus, they should do most of the learning on their own and not wait for the teacher to lecture them. Yet, it is the teacher who should encourage them to rely on themselves more. That is why student-centred classrooms are the best environments to enhance responsibility and to encourage students take risks.

The scholar Leo Jones draws attention to the fact that a student-centered classroom does not mean anarchy; it "isn't a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do" [Jones 2007: 2]. Instead, the author emphasizes that "it's a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time" [Jones 2007: 2].

Thus, students are empowered, in a way, to make their own decisions concerning their learning. It is this power that makes some teachers reluctant to use the learner-centered approach in their teaching. Douglas Brown believes that teachers should not shy away from it. In his opinion, encouraging students to make their own choices (beginning even with the elementary level) helps "to give students a sense of 'ownership' of their learning and thereby add to their intrinsic motivation" [Brown 2001: 47].

Definitely, the desire to learn should first of all come from within. Students should realize by themselves the importance of learning and be responsible for the choices they make. They should not constantly wait for the teacher's approval of what they do or say and be aware of the

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fact that "the most powerful rewards are those that are intrinsically motivated within the learner" [Brown 2001: 59], as "the behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself is self-rewarding; therefore, no externally administered reward is necessary" [Brown 2001: 59].

In this case, the teacher is seen as facilitator of the learning process and not as instructor. Leo Jones's belief is that "being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process" [Jones 2007: 2]. In this way, the teacher will enhance learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy is above all responsibility that comes from the students' part who realize the importance of their own learning. Responsible learners are those who "accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress learning, and behave accordingly" [Scharle, Szabo 2000: 3].

Being "commonly associated with the idea of freedom" [Lamb 2008: 33], learner autonomy should be fostered at all levels. Therefore, teachers "need to develop a sense of responsibility and also, encourage learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning" [Scharle, Szabo 2000: 4]. At the same time, it should be emphasized that "in the traditional teaching-learning context, learner autonomy can only develop in an atmosphere in which both teachers and learners are sensitive to the mutual influences at play" [Lamb 2008: 7].

It would be useful at this point to offer a definition of what teaching is. For example, in Jarvis's opinion "teaching is regarded as an intentional activity in which opportunities to learn are provided" [Jarvis 2006: 19]. In this way, the teacher governed by a concrete intention, i.e. objective, is to offer the students opportunities to learn. It implies that from the very beginning the teacher lives the student the possibility of choice.

The process of teaching is also very complex in its essence. In Jarvis's opinion "teaching is changing; it is being forced to change by the dominant globalising forces of social change" [Jarvis 2006: 13]. It implies that teachers should be always aware of the latest changes and try to use them to get better results. That is why, nowadays, "teachers are faced with playing new roles requiring many more and sometimes different skills" [Jarvis 2006: 13-14].

Technology has become a primary "globalising force" that should be considered as a significant tool in the process of education. It could make learning more motivational and help students get better results. But above all, technology can help boost learner autonomy.

Challenges of learner autonomy

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Fostering learner autonomy turns to be a rather intricate process requiring commitment and seriousness not only from students but also from teachers. That is why there are many challenges that make the teacher hesitate to opt for learner autonomy in their classroom.

One of the causes is that when it comes to freedom, it is a rather relative notion. As known, there is no absolute freedom; there are always certain constraints at stake that restrain a person (e.g. a person can be free within the law, his / her family obligations, etc.). The same thing can be referred to learner autonomy; a student is free to choose within the curriculum. This restraint is applied to both the teacher and the students. That is why the concept of learner autonomy always implies two factors: freedom, but, above all, responsibility. Students "consciously monitor their own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit" [Scharle, Szabo 2000: 3].

At the same time, "loss of control, chaos and inefficient learning are threatening and presumed implications of learner autonomy" [Trebbi 2008: 34]. Yet, learner autonomy does not mean disorder. The teacher's presence is still crucial in facilitating the process of learning. What they should do is to take their role as facilitators seriously and not confound it with the one of controlling. Similarly, they should be open to the new changes in pedagogy and always adjust their goals to the new approaches answering the students' needs.

However, in my opinion, the biggest challenge is that teachers have not learned to let it go. Brian Page cited by B. Kumaravadivelu states: "Learners must no longer sit there and expect to be taught; teachers must no longer stand up there teaching all the time. Teachers have to learn to let go and learners have to learn to take hold" [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 131].

Another challenge pointed out by the cited author consists in establishing the degrees of autonomy: "an important challenge facing both teachers and learners is to determine the degree of autonomy that would be appropriate for their specific learning and teaching context" [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 143]. The scholar suggests that teachers and students negotiate "comfortable degree of autonomy" [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 143]. This emphasizes once again the collaborative nature of the educational process. Thus, students are invited to take active part in it where they are expected to contribute with their ideas and suggestions.

Definitely, learner autonomy does not appear overnight. Instead, it should be cultivated gradually and let the students discover its benefits by themselves. B. Kumaravadivelu recommends a smooth transition from one stage to another: "it certainly makes sense to start with a modest beginning and gradually move toward greater challenges" [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 144].

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The scholar describes three stages. At the initial stage of autonomy, the emphasis is simply on raising the learner's awareness of the reasons behind the teacher's choice of goals, tasks, and materials. At the intermediary stage, the emphasis is on allowing the learner to choose from a range of options given by the teacher. Finally, at the advanced stage, the emphasis is on learner determination of his or her own goals, tasks, and materials [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 144].

Undoubtedly, learner autonomy is extremely complex in its essence and it can be "achieved only through continual struggle" [Kumaravadivelu 2003: 144]. Thus, the teacher and students should be supportive all the way on this difficult path and always remember that hard work brings its own reward.

Technology consumption – a new learning style?

No one can deny the tremendous influence technology has nowadays. It has become essential in the way we watch films and listen to music, socialise and get informed. Thus, people have turned into huge technology consumers. This made educators consider using technology at the lessons in order to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation.

Students differ in the way they assimilate the new material better, they have their own style. As a matter of fact, the word itself has a very broad meaning; style is the particular way a person talks, behaves, dresses, etc. Learning style accordingly is the particular way a person prefers to study, a method that allows him / her to acquire the studied material easier.

The first thing a teacher should do is to discover the students' learning styles, which are "best thought of as a blend or profile that resides within every student" [Grasha 2002: 170].

The teacher should first determine what the most effective perceptive input is. In this way, the teacher is supposed to detect how the students mentally receive, perceive, process, understand, and internalize the new material. Thus, the teacher may notice that some students understand knowledge better if they are shown different visual aids, or if they are asked to perform an action related to the subject topic of the lesson.

Taking into account the senses, students usually fall under four types of learners: visual learners, auditory learners, kinaesthetic learners and tactile learners. At the same time, there is another criterion in determining the student's learning preferences. In this case, the teacher should consider how the student prefers to work (e.g. in group, individually) and learn (e.g. by thinking, by seeing the "whole" rather than in parts and vice versa). As a result, there are: active learners, reflective learners, global learners and sequential learners.

The Grasha-Riechmann model consists of six student learning styles, which in fact represent three pairs of dichotomies: competitive – collaborative, avoidant – participant,

dependent – independent [Grasha 2002: 128]. Anthony F. Grasha studies this model and comes to the conclusion that teachers "do not have to view students' preferences for how they like to learn as immutable" [Grasha 2002: 171].

My belief is that it is impossible to be exclusively a visual or an auditory learner. It definitely depends on the way a student better acquires the new information, but it can only imply that the visual input of information prevails over the auditory. Thus, the visual aids will facilitate the process of learning but not necessary determine it. In general, a teacher should consider finding a balance among them so that every single student from the class acquires new knowledge. Technology could serve as a means that will help realize such a goal.

The word technology is very often related to computer technology because "computers have so pervaded our daily home and workplace contexts" [Brown 2001: 143]. Yet, technology comprises audio-tape players, video players, CD players, and, definitely, computers. The teachers started making use of technology ever since it appeared. For instance, audio-recordings are still used mostly for listening. The video recordings address visual and auditory learners.

When technology became more accessible, teachers started encouraging students to make their own recordings or to produce their own films. In this way, students became actually involved in the process of learning, i.e. they were doing things. Thus, it may be appropriate to talk about the appearance of a new "techie" style.

I would say that "techie" style would be a combination of more than one learning style as it addresses visual learners, as well as auditory learners or kinaesthetic learners. It includes any technology tool that helps in the reception and processing of the studied material. For example, students would assimilate better the material if it were presented in the form of a PPT. This kind of presentation addresses both auditory and visual styles, and the teacher could make it in such a way as to include other learning styles as well.

However, there are teachers who believe that such presentation only boost students' laziness. They complain that students wait for these presentations not taking the trouble to study thoroughly the given topic. I would disagree here as, nowadays, our students are exposed to a variety of different information and they are at a loss. This PPT is to guide them and show what to pay attention to.

The benefits of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

CALL is gaining more and more popularity together with the appearance of numerous computer softwares and hardwares meant to enhance the process of learning. It has become even difficult to keep pace with the latest technological inventions used for educational purposes. "Creativitatea lingvala: de la semn la text", Iasi, Editura PIM, 2014.

Thus, teachers should acquire new skills in order to be able to use them and facilitate the students' learning process.

Warschauer and Healy cited by Douglas H. Brown speak in favour of CALL pointing out the following benefits:

1. multimodal practice with feedback

2. individualization in a large class

3. pair and small-group work on projects, either collaboratively or competitively

4. the fun factor

5. variety in the resources available and learning styles used

6. exploratory learning with large amounts of language data

7. real-life skill building in computer use [Brown 2001: 145].

Indeed, the above mentioned factors once again prove that CALL is a style that would comprise many learning styles at once. Thus, it will not target a particular student with one particular preference but it will address all the students. In addition, it will create a pleasant atmosphere and it could make the learning process enjoyable.

Another important characteristic is that it can help to make the process more individual. Sometimes, in large classes, it is hard to get to every single student. This can lead to the risk of making the process rigid and boring.

One advantage is that students have access to many online sources. They can choose the one that will best suit their goals. The possibility of choosing can foster their learner autonomy. They find another more efficient means of acquiring information, which may differ from the way it is presented by the teacher or in the manuals.

CALL is particularly useful for language learners. The various sites and programmes offering different types of grammar and vocabulary explanations and exercises, the softwares generating tests, the platforms posting online courses, sites organizing online classes – all are supposed to enhance the process of learning a second language and make it more enjoyable.

There is another important factor answering the demands of modern times. As mentioned above, nowadays, more and more people can hardly imagine how life would be without computers, and "as education seeks to respond to the demands of the market, so teaching is forced to change to produce in the most efficient means the learning packages that will be useful to the work situation, or the socio-cultural one, and so on" [Jarvis 2006: 13]. And one of these

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packages should include computer knowledge, and above all, it should guide students how not to get lost in the enormous amount of information they have access to.

Technology tools to increase learner autonomy

There are various interesting technology tools a teacher may consider using either inside or outside the classroom. The ones suggested in the present study are as follows:

- emails;

- blogging;

- site management;

- collaborative projects;

- online tests;

- socializing networks;

- games;

- creation of learning communities.

Teachers could keep in touch with their students via email, especially when feedback is needed. For example, after having sent an assignment to the teacher, the latter could make the necessary comments that will improve the student's skills. The teacher's attitude should be encouraging and positive. Yet, he / she should point out the drawbacks.

Close to emails are the chat rooms that could be organized for educational purposes. Another alternative would be to use Skype for interaction. For instance, a teacher could organize a reading club, where the students would read and discuss a story via Skype. The teacher's presence is not necessary. Yet, he / she could monitor the discussion and help to suggest a certain topic for discussion or make the students reconsider some ideas.

A blog may also be a great tool a teacher should use to enhance learner autonomy. The possibility of having static pages is great as the teacher could post there all the needed grammatical / lexical / phonetic materials in order to ease the students' learning process. It is very convenient as whenever there is a problem a student does not know how to solve it, he / she can always access the blog and see the explanations. In addition, students are always in the know of their teacher's ideas and beliefs which should be posted with regularity. In this way, students could follow the teacher's example and post their own reflections.

Students should be encouraged to keep their own blogs where they would post their reflections on the learning process. Blogs are good to use for specific tasks as well. For example,
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students could post regularly their feedback on the books they are reading, sharing their ideas with the others. In this case, teachers could encourage students to make peer comment. In this way, they will engage in a process of communication where they will share ideas.

Another useful tool is offered by google sites, the creation of which it is not difficult as well. The most important thing is to want to implement a new technological tool in the process of teaching and have enough patience because it will take time till the results become visible. Site management can boost students' responsibility. In addition, it will develop their creative thinking.

Projects in general promote co-operative learning and the principles of student-centred learning. The most important factor is that students work individually. They can do a project either individually or in small groups. However, it is recommended to encourage students to work in groups in order to develop the spirit of collaboration in them. At the same time, they should realize that they are competing with another team. This is supposed to foster co-operation among them.

Projects can be made in the form of a PPT which can be posted on their personal blog or on the class site. Students could opt for another form, e.g. they could make their own film using windows movie maker, or they could even produce it themselves. There is also the possibility of creating a voki [http://www.voki.com/] and place it as well on their blog.

Another useful tool is to be found in the variety of sites offering online testing. Nowadays students can easily test their skills by themselves. In this way, they will get a better understanding of the mistakes they make. In addition, they will not feel embarrassed the way they might in front of the classroom.

All the tools mentioned above are meant to enhance learner autonomy. The student will feel the freedom of expressing himself / herself and forget about the inhibitions that a classroom might cause. However, these are only tools to be used additionally. I think that the teacher still has the power to inspire his / her students. The teacher is the facilitator of the learning process but his presence is still needed.

Conclusions

Being technologically friendly, students should be encouraged to use technology for their academic progress. This would foster learner autonomy, and will make them sense the responsibility they have for their learning. Similarly, learner autonomy will enhance the security needed for risk taking, i.e. students will have to make their own decisions understanding the consequences they may lead to.

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Definitely, there are many challenges that both the teacher and students will have to deal with, but the determination to attain the set goals should prevail. Learner autonomy should be acquired step by step. Thus the teacher should be very patient and gradually diminish his / her presence in the students' learning process. Certainly, his / her impact is still significant as the teacher is the first to set an example to follow. He / She may influence the students' behaviour and inspire him to learn.

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