

Learner autonomy and the role of this competence in learning foreign languages in Albanian schools

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Abstract

In didactics and in the scientific research of foreign languages, the concept of learner autonomy has become one of the keywords over the last years and now is taking more and more place in teaching and learning practices in schools. One of the major tasks of the education system is to educate creative minds, learners who are responsible for their learning, and one of the conditions to achieve this is by encouraging them towards the principle of autonomy.

The process of learning a foreign language is long and difficult. There are many factors that influence the successful learning of a foreign language. Today's European Education System is oriented towards communicative competence and linguistic performance with the aim of long-term learning by focusing on the students, claiming complete avoidance of frontal teaching.

Student-centered learning requires the ability of self control and self-regulating the learning process. Numerous scientific studies have shown a connection between this ability and school results. But how much do teachers value and promote this important process in our pre-university education system, in our everyday teaching practices? What is the approach regarding Albanian schools?

At the beginning of this article, the theoretical conceptions on "learner autonomy" will be dealt with in more detail in order to better understand the importance it has on empowering generations towards fundamental learning competencies. The study further focuses on the role of the teacher, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and their importance to foster learner autonomy. In order to collect data, a questionnaire was used as a research instrument. The groups on which the study was conducted were learners from the age of 13 to 18 and at the same time teachers of foreign languages in the lower pre-university education (grades 8-9) and secondary education (10-12) in several Albanian schools centered in the cities of Tirana, Shkodra, Korça and Pogradec.

We are aware that the fast-paced development of society and European integration constantly put us in front of new challenges and demands to adapt learning in this context. It is necessary to replace the traditional approaches with contemporary ones.

Keywords: learner autonomy, long term learning, learning strategy.

1. Introduction

In a world that is changing rapidly, both socially and economically, new priorities and demands have arisen for both learners and teachers in the context of learning. The choice of contents and the way of organizing the learning process are the challenges we have to face, in order to adapt to new realities and demands of the time.

In the field of teaching and learning foreign languages, the concept of learner autonomy in foreign literature had its beginnings in the 70s - 80s. This concept was further developed when some methods with a communicative approach began to occupy a leading place in foreign language classes.

The difficulty in defining the concept of autonomy related to the process of learning foreign languages lies in the clear division that exists in literature, on the concept of general learning autonomy, and that which deals specifically with the autonomy of learning foreign languages. The most widespread definition of autonomy in the learning process is the explanation proposed by Holec¹ who says that: "**Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning**". This definition of Holec is based on an ideal concept of an autonomous learner who gives up the passive learning, to move to the dynamic, active and creative side, skills that can be developed in classroom by the teacher, thus increasing the sense of responsibility and self-awareness in the learning process. He explains that learner autonomy is a skill that is acquired and not inborn. It is something that learners can develop naturally, or continuously in a more formal and systematic way.²

Referring to Benson³, Wolff mentions⁴ the multidimensional aspect of the concept of autonomy. This concept summarizes a number of meanings from other fields of interest. Therefore, it is difficult to give this concept a unique definition that is related to the context of language learning. But, today, many researchers have elaborated on the concept of autonomy in this field and have tried to give their personal definition on this concept.

Along with Holec, it was Little⁵ who formulated his theoretical concept on learner autonomy. He emphasizes that the promotion of this competence is the main objective of education, although humans come into this life as an autonomous being. For a child it is an unconscious skill to learn the mother tongue, whereas in the school context, learners must be sensitized and trained for the learning process.

According to Bimmel and Rampillon⁶, the essence of autonomous learning is, among other things, "the ability to structure, plan and reflect on your learning". This means that learners must have the ability to define, to understand clearly the objectives, the goal of learning, the path to the goal as well as to critically judge their decisions regarding their learning.

The reflective questions that learners should make are: What should I learn and for what purpose? How can I learn/memorize it and what materials can I use? And in the end, did I achieve my goal?

But to achieve this, in addition to their personal experience, the impulses must also come from the teacher. This is where the reconceptualization of the organization of the lesson begins, where the traditional teacher-learner roles are re-dimensioned.

¹ Holec, Henri (1981): *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, pg.3.

² Loc.cit.

³ 1997 pg. 18,19.

⁴ In Bausch, K-R et al., 2007: *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht*, fifth edition, pg.321.

⁵ Loc.cit.

⁶ Bimmel dhe Rampillon 2000: *Lernerautonomie und Lernstrategien*, pg. 5.

2. The importance and role of the teacher in promoting the autonomy of foreign language learning.

Knowledge of at least one foreign language is a must. In addition to enriching human knowledge and building communication bridges between cultures, learning languages is also a practical opportunity for giving and taking from the country that we live and work. With the changes of recent years in the political sphere, there is an increase in freedom and the possibility of mobility almost all over the world. The number of students who want to study, live and work in other countries is increasing day by day. Moreover, it is enough to take a look at the announcements/job offers on the Internet and the conditions that must be met, to understand what an important place foreign languages occupy in every sphere of life, beyond the profession we practice. Based on the above, we naturally conclude that only the knowledge acquired at school about foreign language(s) is not enough to meet the demands of this new reality. According to Bardhyl Musai⁷, the school is no longer required to reproduce or master information, but its mission is to prepare the new generations with the skills to search for information, to operate with it, to analyze it critically and to enable learners to build and create knowledge, so they can be able to solve problems. That is why there is a need for the knowledge acquired at school to be repeated, reflected, improved and expanded. Thus, new challenges and demands arise for teachers to encourage the learners' willingness and desire to continuously develop self-regulating and self-directed learning. Intrinsic motivation should be encouraged, the source of which is awakening the learners' interest. They focus on the goal and this encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other⁸.

Students should be motivated to learn. The teacher should help them to achieve a positive approach to their willingness to learn⁹.

But a permanent challenge remains the development of the ability to learn in learners, where, in addition to conveying new information, it is essential to familiarize them with learning strategies/techniques and the opportunities to put them into practice. According to Musai¹⁰, the emphasis today is to help learner acquire effective learning strategies and tactics that focus on attention and effort, process information in detail, and monitor learning.

3. The importance of learning techniques/strategies. Awareness of the learning process.

The concept "strategy" is an important integral part of the cognitive and constructivist psychological theories of learning, where humans are conceived as an autonomous

⁷ In Metodologji e Mësimdhënies (Teaching Methodology) (2014), second edition, p. 2.

⁸ Scharle.Á, Szabó. A (2000): Learner Autonomy, p.7.

⁹ Bushi,J. "Motivation in the learning of foreign languages" in Book of Proceedings: Sixteenth International Conference on: "Social and Natural Sciences – Global Challenge 2021", Vjena, pg.150.

¹⁰ Musai, op.cit. p.49.

system, whose main task is to obtain information from the world around them and to transform it into structures. In order to perceive new information, to process and memorize it, to restructure, organize and automate knowledge, learners need to use learning techniques, which should be presented by the teacher in the classroom.¹¹ In constructivist theories of learning, the “individuality” of this process is emphasized. Conceptualizing the human brain as a closed functional system, constructivism emphasizes the idea of learning as a responsible, self-directed process based primarily on individual knowledge. Everyone builds cognitive structures by interpreting reality based on experiences in certain circumstances. Based on the fact that everyone perceives reality differently, therefore the results and achievements will be individually different for each learner.¹² Learners are also seen as an active participant in the learning process. Learning can only be achieved in an active process, from the interaction between them and the knowledge that is built during this interaction.¹³ Learners are seen as capable of selecting information, processing it and internalizing it in a permanent process of revision and reconstruction of knowledge and experiences.

The concept of “learning strategy” is a plan that the learner has to achieve the desired success.¹⁴ But in order to have a plan, he needs the teacher who informs and at the same time supervises him, the teacher carries a facilitator and counsellor function, a function which later the learner, after following this example, learns to fulfill on his own, autonomously even outside the classroom environment. It is of particular importance that during the lesson learners should be aware of learning techniques that they can actually use naturally, unconsciously, as well as offer them new ways, bringing to attention the efficiency within the learning process. Ros¹⁵ also brings to our attention the metacognitive and cognitive strategies of learning, which at first should be well known by the teacher himself and then should be thematized in the classroom. Learners’ awareness of learning processes, the transmission of reading, writing, listening techniques, memorization of new words, techniques of processing structures through various tasks and exercises, as well as techniques of using the foreign language in authentic situations, would help them to control and self-regulate their learning, so that it can turn into something really efficient and long-lasting. But according to Rexhaj¹⁶, such diversity in learning is rarely offered by the teacher to facilitate the process of learning. But it is his responsibility to facilitate this process of awareness.

¹¹ Wolff. in Bausch, K-R et al., 2007: Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht, fifth edition, p. 323.

¹² Dubs, R. 2009: Lehrerverhalten. Ein Beitrag zur Interaktion von Lehrenden und Lernenden im Unterricht, p. 25.

¹³ Loc.cit.

¹⁴ Bimmel&Rampillon, 2000: Lernerautonomie und Lernstrategien, p. 53.

¹⁵ in: DaF unterrichten: Basiswissen Didaktik Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache, p.132.

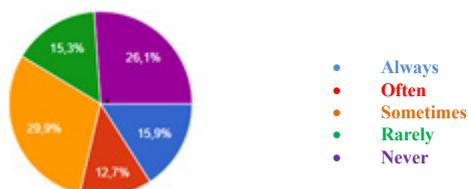
¹⁶ in: Teori dhe strategji të mësimdhënies-Qasja konstruktiviste, (Theory and teaching strategies - Constructivist approach) Pristina 2019, p.118.

4. Questionnaires

In order to understand what is the approach in Albanian public schools, in the context of the learner autonomy, and the efforts to convey it to learners, two questionnaires have been developed, one addressed to learners and the other to teachers of lower pre-university education (grades VIII-IX) and secondary education (grades X-XII). Each of the questionnaires contains 14 questions answered by 16 foreign language teachers, and 17 questions answered by 157 learners, at the age of 13 to 18 years old. 66.2% of the subjects are learners of secondary schools, while 33.8% are learners of lower pre-university education. 62.4% of them learn English, 33.8% German and some of them French. The questions were designed based on the cognitive and metacognitive theories of language learning, and the Likert scale was used to evaluate the answers. The main results of the questionnaires will be analyzed and presented below. It is important to establish whether the promotion of the principle of autonomy constitutes an educational objective in the classroom, both from the perspective of learners and from that of teachers.

5. *The results of the questionnaire with learners:*

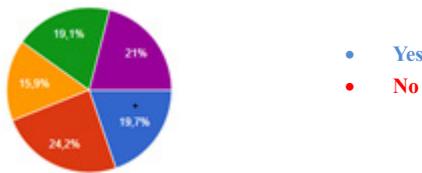
5.1 When they were asked if they have ever discussed in class with the teacher about the importance of learning techniques, it is noticeable that a significant part answered that they had never, rarely, or sometimes done so. Only 12.7% of the learners answered that they often discussed this in their classes, and 15.9% answered that they always discuss these techniques with the teacher. About 63.1% of them answered that they are specifically oriented towards a certain technique, e.g. related to memorizing words, how to use the dictionary or related to reading and listening techniques. 36.9% of them answered that they have never received such orientation from the teacher.



5.2. Asked if the effectiveness of the technique used was then discussed in class with the teacher, 58% of them answered positively, stating that they had discussed with the teacher the effectiveness of the technique towards which they were oriented, emphasizing the importance of the techniques used as a necessity towards optimal achievement in school. On the other hand, 42% of the learners say that they have never discussed this issue during the lesson.



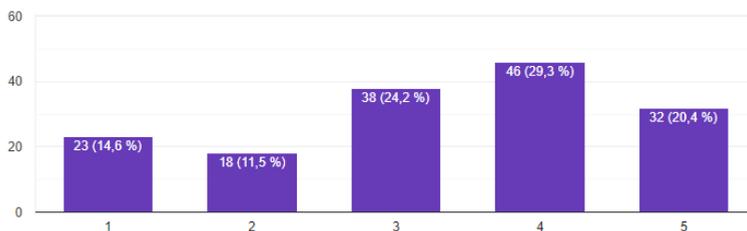
5.3. An important issue in the teaching process is knowing the students, their needs and their ways of learning. No one learns the same way. In order to achieve success in the teaching process, the teacher must understand their learning styles and these should be the basis for planning the lesson. But only about 44% of the respondents answered that during the organization and development of a group task, the teacher pays attention to their individuality in learning.



5.4. When asked if they themselves have managed to understand and discover through their teacher which style or way they learn best, 58% of them answered positively, while 42% of them stated this process has not been successfully implemented.



5.5. To the question of how they evaluate the spirit of cooperation with their teacher from 1 to 5, (where 1 is completely unsuccessful and 5 is completely successful), only 78 learners answered positively, evaluating with 4 and 5 according to Likert scale. What is noticed is that 79 other learners, more than half, have their reservations regarding aspects of cooperation with their teacher in the classroom.

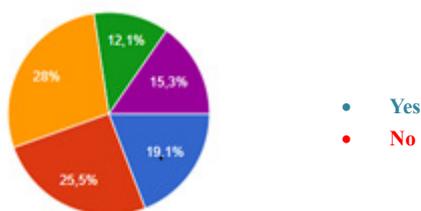


5.6. The participants in this questionnaire were then asked if they feel motivated by the teacher to learn the foreign language. A five-point scale was used to obtain their responses (where 1 is never and 5 is always). What is noticed is that 82 out of 157 participants, i.e. more than half, have given a negative assessment, evaluating with 1, 2 and 3 points according to the Likert scale. Meanwhile, less than half express that they feel motivated by the teacher to learn a foreign language, evaluating with a scale of 4 and 5.

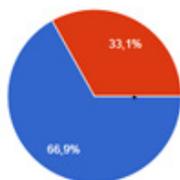


5.7. It is effective and motivating to give learners, from time to time, where possible, freedom of choice in accordance with his learning preferences regarding texts, social forms of work, projects, freedom or opportunities to choose a topic for treatment etc. For this reason, the participants were asked if their teacher takes their interests and wishes into consideration during the lesson.

The results of the questionnaire show that 15.3% of the learners think that this opportunity was “never” given to them in class, 12.1% said that it was given to them “rarely”, while 28% chose to answer with “sometimes”. So more than half of the respondents (55.4%) do not have a positive experience regarding this.

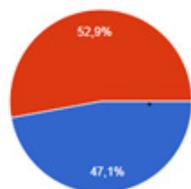


5.8. The next question concerns the self-assessment as an important analytical element towards self-regulation. By working on it, students become aware of their learning and are able to articulate their needs. 66.9% of them, say that the teacher regularly encourages them to assess themselves, compared to a relatively smaller number of about 33.1%, who were never asked by the teacher to pay attention to this.



- Traditional teacher who has the right to make decisions in every direction in the classroom.
- Teacher in the role of moderator, advisor and companion on the path of knowledge

5.9. In conclusion, slightly more than half of the participants in this questionnaire see their teacher in the role of moderator, advisor and companion on the path of knowledge. One result that should be taken into account is that 47%, i.e. very close to the limit of half of the respondents, regard their teacher as a traditional one, who has the right to make decisions in every aspect in the classroom.



- Yes regularly
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

6. The questionnaire with the teachers

In questionnaire number two a total of 16 foreign language teachers participated, where 7 of them teach in the lower pre-university system and 9 in the secondary pre-university system, in several schools in the cities of Tirana, Shkodra, Korça and Pogradec.

6.1. To the question of how important it is for students to become familiar with learning techniques, 93.8% of teachers answered positively, considering this as very important. Then, the teachers were asked if they oriented learners towards the main strategies/techniques of foreign language learning, and if so, towards which ones?

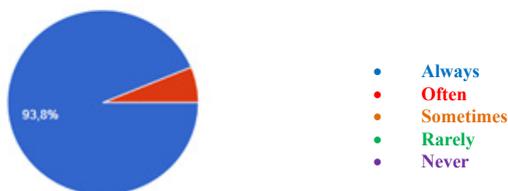
What stands out is that their answers are incomplete, confusing and often unclear, so they prove the lack of knowledge of learning techniques or not having a clear understanding of this concept. Below are some of the responses:

- "Through cultural knowledge, through listening"
- "Yes by working with groups, by using the media, etc"
- "Yes, for example learning in stages, not all at once; sketches; teaching files etc"
- "Dividing the task into small steps, taking a break every 15-20 minutes, practicing a little bit every day, sometimes you have to learn things by heart."
- "Yes, the technique of communication, of questions, discussions, reproductive writing, etc."
- "Yes through practical and digital methods."
- "Yes, I often advise learners to listen to different CDs in order to improve their pronunciation"

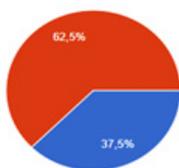
6.2. The next question is related to the class discussion on the effectiveness of learning technique in the acquisition of new knowledge. 50% of the teachers declare in their answers that after introducing in class the learning techniques, they regularly discuss with their students the measurable results and the success brought by the technique in question, 37.5% give the answer often and 12.5% sometimes.



6.3. Whether teachers pay attention in class to different types of learners and to the different styles/ways through which they learn, almost all teachers (93.8%) answer with “yes always”.



6.4. Also, an almost unanimous response from all the teachers who participated in this questionnaire was to whether they pay attention during the lesson to the preferences/ desires of the learners regarding social forms of work, projects, tasks. In this case, the answers are divided between “always” and “often”, thus pointing out the growing trend of learner-centered teaching.

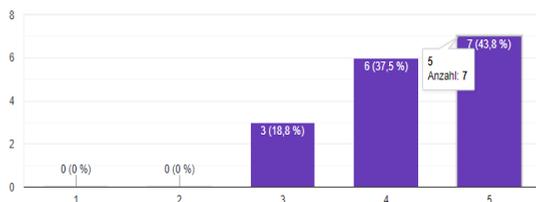


6.5. It was very important for us to gain a more concrete look at the idea that teachers have regarding the concept of “learner-centered teaching”. What is noticed in their formulations is the clarity they have for this concept and that they have now all embraced the fact that the traditional teaching should belong to the past. Below, we present some of the comments of the teachers who were asked:

- *Learners are involved in the learning process. They discuss, ask questions and they are not passive listeners.*

- *It means that the learner is the center of the learning process and not the teacher, who is just a moderator.*
- *Total avoidance of frontal learning.*
- *The learner is active by having a conversation and by asking questions and giving answers.*
- *The learner discovers new knowledge with the help of the teacher, he/she is active and cooperative in this process.*
- *Learning should be made Interactive. The student discovers his own abilities through concrete action.*
- *All my knowledge is accessible to the learners, the teacher is not the centre of the class, cooperation is important.*
- *Involvement of the class in the discovery of knowledge.*
- *Learner-centered teaching means that learners are active during the lesson. So they should talk and discuss more than the teacher.*

6.6. On the following question, the teachers were asked to give an assessment of how they see themselves as moderators and advisors in the context of teaching, using a five-point scale (where 1 is not at all and 5 is very much). The results show that the majority of teachers assessed themselves with 4 or 5 points according to the Likert scale, considering themselves moderators and advisors in class.



6.7. Another important question was the one related to learner motivation or encouragement towards autonomous/independent learning in order to raise their awareness towards self-regulation and long-term learning. To find out if this process happens in the classroom and through which methods it is realized, the teachers were given the opportunity to express themselves through comments. Below, we find some of these answers:

- *By encouraging them to listen as much as possible and use the vocabulary.*
- *Through independent work discussed in class.*
- *Encouraging independent work, whether in written or spoken language. By creating hypothetical problem situations, which learners must try to solve.*
- *Always giving homework and text summaries.*
- *By creating a set of clear and specific goals that are intended to be achieved and that increase intrinsic motivation when achieved.*
- *I give additional tasks, I ask for their confrontation in various issues, etc*
- *By giving homework, reading texts and translating, playing different games for their*

motivation in learning the German language.

- *By guiding them how to learn and what is necessary for their level.*
- *Interaction of learners with each other is important.*
- *By encouraging them to use the foreign language not only at school but also in society or in the family.*
- *I think I encourage them. For them important things are exercises and digital work, during projects.*
- *I motivate them to find the real reasons in themselves why they need that language, so they be ready for other challenges.*

6.8. Nowadays, one of the questions that challenges every foreign language teacher is what should be done concretely to avoid passive learning and to promote long-term learning. The ideas and experience of the teachers asked, regarding this topic, were as follows:

- *By avoiding individual assignments and by encouraging group work in the classroom to foster a spirit of group cooperation and exchange of ideas.*
- *Students can ask questions, not only the teacher. They should use grammar and vocabulary to communicate in a given situation.*
- *Partner work, use of media, prompting and speaking practice.*
- *I encourage them by giving them time to deal with vocabulary words and to prepare a text with a simple content theme according to the given topic.*
- *Interactive lesson.*
- *By writing on the board or by correcting their friends during the lesson.*
- *By encouraging learner to interact with each other through dialogues, group work, watching a film together and commenting on it.*
- *Assignment of creative tasks.*
- *Active learning and critical thinking are important, the aim is to arouse learners' curiosity, to develop in them the ability to make discoveries independently.*
- *Not learning by heart, but with logic and concrete examples.*
- *Teaching using different games that are attractive and stimulating for learners. For example By means of the game, the word or expression in the foreign language can be learned easily.*
- *Brainstorming as motivation and incentive in learning.*

Conclusions

The results show that teachers should approach learning environments differently to motivate and encourage learners to control and self-regulate learning. They should become aware of the importance of this process and encourage learners towards active learning, towards an effective learning process with interactive methods and techniques.

While the results of the teachers' questionnaires show a positive spirit towards learner autonomy and a support of student-centered learning, this spirit is not as clear in the answers collected by the learners. A significant part of them proves that there are deficiencies on the part of the teacher in the classroom, in terms of thematizing

the importance of learning techniques and specifically the orientation towards them. Learners use different techniques in the classroom without being fully aware of the reason why these techniques were chosen by the teacher and how effective they really are.

From their answers, deficiencies are also found in the process of knowing learners and their learning styles, even though this is a very important issue in the process of lesson planning.

A large proportion of learners describe the teacher as the decision-maker for almost every aspect in the classroom, valuing the spirit of cooperation at suboptimal levels. They state that they do not always feel motivated by the teacher to learn the foreign language.

During the questionnaires, it was noticed that not only pupils need to feel motivated. Even the teachers need to be motivated and to have the appropriate conditions for the best and the most effective teaching.

We point out the need for more training for the foreign language teachers, so that all the newest methods and techniques of learner-centered teaching become more perceptible, easier to apply and use in an efficient and permanent way by them.

Teachers should not consider learning as a general process, but should connect the achievements and failures of their students with their abilities for self-control and self-regulation.

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