

ON AUTONOMY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

DESPRE AUTONOMIE ÎN STUDIAREA LIMBILOR STRĂINE

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Abstract: *The present paper is aimed at analysing the concept of student's autonomy, defined as conscious responsibility for learning, from the viewpoint of the method promoted by the training courses for English teachers, CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults), organised by Cambridge ESOL. These intensive courses approach a humanistic type of study (personally experienced by the author) in which the classroom becomes the space where teachers and students collaborate effectively, the environment where they form a true community.*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea de față propune o analiză a autonomiei studentului, definită drept acceptarea conștientă a responsabilității în procesul de învățare, din perspectiva metodei promovate de cursurile de instruire a profesorilor de limba engleză, CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) și DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults), organizate de Cambridge ESOL. Acest cursuri intensive abordează un tip umanist de studiu (experimentat personal de autoare), în care sala de curs este spațiul unde profesorul și studentul colaborează efectiv, mediul în care aceștia formează o adevărată comunitate.*

Key words: *second language acquisition, autonomy, self-study*

Cuvinte cheie: *învățarea limbilor străine, autonomie, studiu individual*

In the contemporary socio-economic context, second language (particularly English) acquisition has become not only imperatively necessary, but also extremely urgent. Nowadays, when communication has become a *sine-qua-non* prerequisite for progress, English is the language of science and technology, trade and, not in the least, of culture. The importance of studying foreign languages, particularly the English language, is reinforced by the objective difficulties confronted by present and future specialists in various fields, among which the agricultural field – from every-day conversation to specialist research and the participation in international symposia and conferences.

Thus, there has occurred the need to develop modern, fast and efficient methods to learn foreign languages, taking into account that the end goal of learning is for the individual to acquire a personal understanding of the subject, not take possession of theories that are alien to their own mental patterns and system of values.

For this purpose, the concept of autonomy has come to be ever more significant to the teaching-learning process over the recent years, with a focus on the paramount role of the student in the learning process.

Autonomy implies that the rigid education system should be abandoned, as it is exclusively based on the sheer authority of the teacher, as well as the subjective and fragmentary transmission of information. According to the traditional education principles, knowledge reflects objective reality – if the teacher can be considered the owner of this objective reality, then learning is only the information transfer from one individual to another: educators are nothing but information conveyors, whereas the student simply a passive receptor. In the classic education system, the teacher is the direct controller of the learning process, being followed step by step by the student.

Autonomy supports the elimination of this restrictive system, promoting the adjustment of the didactic procedures to the student's previous knowledge (in specialist literature, the student's *schemata*, i.e. the pre-existent knowledge of the topic); at the same time, autonomy is concentrated on active involvement in solving specific issues. Through this method, the student gains a paramount role in his/her own development. Thus, knowledge becomes an individual construct: information is no longer passively transmitted (taught), but consciously and actively acquired (learned).

Literature defines student's autonomy as conscious responsibility for learning in the assimilation of information; in other words, autonomy in studying a foreign language is an explicit intention based on awareness: one cannot accept responsibility without realising the actual motivation and intended purpose. The individual must assume, at least partly, the initiatives that define and direct the learning process; s/he must also participate actively in the evolution of the assimilation stages in order to achieve the objectives of the instructive process. From this point of view, learning is no longer based on meaningless memorization, turning into a constructive process of action and interaction within which – and together with his/her previous experience – each individual is building his/her own system of understanding. Thus, learning becomes a dynamic process of permanent analysis and experimentation, of continuous adaptation and development, enabling the student to become what the British educator and theorist Jeremy Harmer designates as 'good learners': "...students who are prepared to take such responsibility for their own learning (by studying in their own time, doing homework, thinking carefully about what would be best for them) are good learners. Good learners, in other words, don't just wait to be taught." (HARMER 9)

Student's autonomy has often been misinterpreted as freedom from the teacher's guidance, from a pre-established plan or schedule, even the freedom to choose the instruction mode. It is necessary that each of these ways of understanding 'freedom' should be analysed through the perspective of autonomy. Actually, the fundamental type of freedom implied by autonomy is the student's freedom towards him/herself, that is, his/her capacity to overcome limits. Semantically and didactically, this is the essential meaning of autonomy as a concept.

However, this approach does not presuppose the complete repudiation of the teacher's role. Under no circumstances, autonomy must not be understood as teacher-free learning, as the latter plays an extremely important role in guiding students. Nevertheless, the educator is no longer a simple information disseminator in the traditional sense, but an adviser, a guide who provides the working methods and instruments by which the student is able to 'recycle' previous knowledge and experiment permanently, i.e. to learn.

Expressed in time through such syntagms as 'humanistic teaching', 'collaborative learning', 'experience-based learning', etc., the concept of autonomy includes the global vision on the student as a human being, above anything. This has a double significance: firstly, it reminds that the student brings his/her own life experience into the classroom; secondly, successful assimilation of information depends on its relevance.

From this standpoint, an illustrative instance of autonomous didactic process is the method promoted by Cambridge ESOL, University of Cambridge, via the training courses for initial and more experienced English teachers known as CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults), respectively. Some of the most modern teacher-training programmes, these intensive courses are devised to provide a wide range of didactic tools and methods that ensure a flexible and highly efficient teaching-learning process.

After ten years of teaching experience, I decided to take the CELTA Course with the specific aim to develop my teaching skills and evaluate my teaching methods taking into

consideration their effectiveness from the learner's point of view, and update them according to modern, rigorous professional standards, as compared with the traditional teaching practices. I found the highly intensive and demanding CELTA not only a mind-modelling course, but also one of the best methods to acquire (or, as in my case) revise the knowledge and skills of a true teacher.

The flexible classroom management techniques allowing for spontaneity and smooth adaptation to change, and the variety of teaching styles permitted a deeper understanding of the collaboration-based philosophy of 21st-century teaching. From this point of view, the CELTA Course provided a thorough insight into modern, as opposed to conventional, instruction. The former regards knowledge as individual possession: information is no longer passively accepted but consciously and actively assimilated; thus, learning becomes an individual responsibility, a consciously-accepted undertaking.

The changes occurring in both teacher practice and student learning turn the process of education into a constructive and enriching experience, for it is the educator's duty to design a functional context for learning in which students should learn more and faster. In the study of foreign languages, the teacher should set the conditions for an effective learning process, setting aside formal instruction and creating 'mock' cases. In these situations that closely resemble real-life circumstances, students should learn skills by interacting with real situations, since learning has to be situated in a context similar to the one in which the skills will be used, as it is well-known that success depends on the instantiation of this feature of apprenticeship in a relevant learning environment. The learning environment can thus become effectively instructional if the purpose of the design is to facilitate the cognitive processes by letting the learner solve authentic problems within the defined learning environment.

Another important issue championed by the CELTA methodology is that, by lowering his/her personal profile and limiting lockstep (teacher-student communication), the instructor encourages interaction between learners who share intellectual goals and motivations, and thus gain confidence and self-control in the learning process. As HARMER remarked:

"In groups, students tend to participate more equally, and they are also more able to experiment and use the language..."

[...] Both pairwork and groupwork give the students chances for greater independence. Because they are working together without the teacher controlling every move, they take some of their own learning decisions, they decide what language to use to complete a certain task, and they can work without the pressure of the whole class listening to what they are doing. Decisions are cooperatively arrived at, responsibilities are shared." (HARMER 21)

After the completion of the CELTA Course, I returned to Romania where I am implementing the knowledge acquired over those four weeks in 2006, particularly by trying to adapt my teaching methods to the specific purpose of students' self-discovery and independence. Particularly in second language acquisition, autonomy is a must for "However good a teacher may be, students will never learn a language – or anything else – unless they aim to learn outside as well as during class time. This is because language is too complex and varied for there to be enough time for students to learn all they need to know in a classroom." (HARMER 335)

This approach to teaching and learning definitely motivates learners with respect to language acquisition and learning in an interactive and interdependent manner: students should be helped to learn how to learn, how to trust their own instincts and their peers, to develop their linguistic (and extra-linguistic) skills by mutual confidence and support. Moreover, once their learning styles and preferences, interests and motivation are accurately identified and defined, there is need to vary the didactic equipment, and adapt the existing materials or create new

ones in order to meet the students' needs. And this is where, in Harmer's opinion, the 'good teacher' intervenes, that is, provides alternatives to the classroom, creating a pattern of individualised learning that enables students to take charge of their own acquisition of learning. In this respect, the creation of self-access centres, equipped with authentic materials (e.g. tapes, CDs, DVDs, newspapers, the Internet), will respond to the individual differences between the students in terms of pace of learning, learning styles, and preferences.

Based on my experience of the CELTA Course, I believe that it is about time for the traditional education system, still massively practised in Romania, to adapt its structure in order to meet the new demands of modern society in the light of the essential features of communication: simplicity, autonomy, and relevance of information. By applying the inductive approach which focuses on learners and their needs for wide communication, specific purposes, and self-expression, learners can be helped to communicate according to the basic rules of modern education in which "Learning is a partnership between teachers and students." (HARMER 9)

This humanistic type of study turns the classroom into a space where teacher and student collaborate effectively to create an active transfer of information, the physical environment where master and disciple form a true community.

LITERATURE

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