

## THE ROLE OF STUDENT AUTONOMY IN ESP CLASSES

Lect. univ. dr. Mirela COSTELEANU

Universitatea Națională de Știință și Tehnologie Politehnica București  
Centrul universitar Pitești

***Abstract:** The concept of learner autonomy often causes strong reactions. Its critics regard it as an idealistic goal which distracts learners and teachers from their main objective – developing communicative competence, linguistic competence and cultural understanding. Its advocates see it as a prerequisite for effective learning. Students who succeed in taking control of their learning experiences become not only better language learners, but also responsible members of the community they belong to. Autonomous learners are self-motivated and reflective, which is why their learning is efficient and effective. Unfortunately, most learners often rely on their teachers for instructions and guidance. Instead of avoiding tasks that require autonomy, teachers should equip students with the skills and know-how to rely on themselves. The present paper aims to analyse the correlation between learner autonomy and academic performance, the relationship between autonomous and controlled motivation and aspects of students' perception of working autonomously in a higher education setting.*

**Key words:** autonomous, controlled, motivation, achievement, obstacles

### 1. Introduction

Do students get higher grades at school if they enjoy learning? Do they need to put psychological pressure on themselves if they want to get good results? Empirical research relying on Self-Determination Theory<sup>1</sup> has shown that different forms of psychological pressure such as the threat of punishment and the promise of reward rarely lead to the desired result. Instead, autonomous motivation is conducive to desired educational outcomes. It refers to activities that students carry out because they find them interesting and challenging. Controlled motivation, on the other hand, refers to tasks that students have to do under some internal or external pressure (activities performed in order to boost their self-esteem or to avoid embarrassing situations such as being punished or criticized, getting low grades or failing exams).

Autonomy means much more than being able to act on one's own. It involves the ability to respond creatively, not stereotypically, to one's environment and to different situations as they arise. Learner autonomy and autonomous learning practices may be seen as a response to the challenging educational

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<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Ryan, Edward L. Deci, *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*, The Guilford Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806>.

environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teachers and students alike need to continually adjust their teaching/learning styles and strategies in order to meet the needs of the job market.

Frustrations among teachers dealing with nonautonomous students have been on the rise in recent years. What some teachers seem not to take into account is the close connection between motivation and autonomy. Students' motivation is influenced by whether or not they have enough opportunities to become autonomous. Being able to make their own choices makes them feel they have control over their own learning, which creates a sense of responsibility.

Learner autonomy has been seen as the ultimate goal of the educational process for a long time. It is described as a very „complicated”<sup>2</sup> and „multifaceted”<sup>3</sup> concept. The present paper aims to investigate the interrelationship between learner autonomy and academic achievement. It also analyzes ESP students' readiness to make and carry out choices without their teacher's involvement, and their ability to organize their own learning and to monitor their progress.

## 2. Literature review

Over the past 30 years, Self-Determination Theory<sup>4</sup> has played a crucial role in understanding students' behaviour in the classroom by studying motivation from different perspectives. According to this theory, there are three kinds of motivation that lie on a continuum of self-determination, namely autonomous regulation, controlled regulation and amotivation. Autonomous motivation is described as adopting a behaviour because it corresponds to one's intrinsic goals. Controlled motivation is associated with an external regulation – an individual's behaviour is dictated by a fear of punishment or an expectation of a reward. Amotivation is described as the lack of desire to engage in any activity.

Autonomy was described as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning”<sup>5</sup>. Wenden<sup>6</sup> identifies a list of characteristics that need to be developed by learners whose goal is to become autonomous in their learning process. The list includes the following:

1. insights into their learning styles and strategies
2. the willingness to take risks

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<sup>2</sup> David Little, *Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning*, In *The guide to good practice for learners and teachers in languages*, Linguistic and Area studies, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Smith, Ema Ushioda, *Autonomy: under whose control?* In R. Pemberton, S. Toogood & A. Barfield (Eds.), *Maintaining Control: Autonomy and Language Learning*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009, p. 241-253.

<sup>4</sup> Richard M. Ryan, Edward L. Deci, *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*, The Guilford Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806>.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Holec, *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, Oxford/New York Pergamon Press, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Anita Wenden, *Metacognitive knowledge and language learning*, *Applied Linguistics*, 19 (4), <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/19.4.515>, 1998, p. 515-537.

3. an active approach to the learning task at hand
4. the ability to process language into a separate reference system
5. the willingness to revise and reject rules that do not apply
6. a tolerant approach to language.

Autonomy is “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action”<sup>7</sup>. This capacity is innate, but it needs to be developed with practice. Crabbe states that “the primary purpose of a curriculum is to provide a range of learning opportunities and to facilitate the take-up of those opportunities in order to achieve specified goals”<sup>8</sup>. If students understand the learning task, they develop a sense of identification with their learning and become motivated to carry out their tasks successfully.

Over the past three decades, the concept of life-long learning has received a lot of attention all over the world. It aims to develop in learners a set of skills that respond to current economic, social and job market needs. Students have become self-interested individuals in an ever-changing world and they associate autonomy with the concept of self-interest and self-development. According to Bliidi<sup>9</sup>, learning is a process during which the learner receives the theoretical concepts, then experiences and reflects on them until they become an integrant part of their frame of reference. The emergency of autonomous learning resulted in the shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness. Students are no longer perceived as passive, receptive participants to the learning process. They play an active role in the classroom, being able to adapt to changing needs and realities.

### **3. The benefits of becoming autonomous**

As James suggests, one of the main goals of English language teaching is that “students will apply outside the classroom what they have learnt inside the classroom”<sup>10</sup>. Cotterall points out that learner autonomy is not just an objective for highly committed students completing optional courses, but should be seen as “an essential goal of all learning”<sup>11</sup>. It helps students maximize their engagement with minimum educator input, empowering them to take control of their learning and allowing them to tailor their learning process to their own needs and learning styles. It also helps students boost their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, giving them the freedom to organize their learning, to reflect on their progress and to make adjustments when needed.

Autonomous learning is more dynamic than traditional teacher-led learning. Students learn at their own pace, in a more flexible and enjoyable way.

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<sup>7</sup> David Little, *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*, Authentik, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> David Crabbe, *Learning opportunities: adding learning value to tasks*, *ELT Journal*, 61 (2), 2007, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Soufiane Bliidi, *Collaborative autonomy, A mode of learner autonomy development*, Springer Science and Business Media Singapore, 2017, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mark James, *Teaching for transfer in ELT*, *ELT Journal*, 60/2, 2006, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Cotterall, *Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses*, *ELT Journal*, 54/2, 2000, p. 109.

They see learning and living as two main components of their ongoing development of potential in the cognitive, emotional and social domains<sup>12</sup>.

Successful self-regulated students assume an active role in their learning. They are willing to make efforts, to accept challenging tasks, to strive to understand the learning material, which leads to academic success. Autonomous learners know what their strengths and weaknesses are, they know what is important and what is useless in their learning environment, and they have a realistic perception of their ability to reach their objective.

#### **4. How to promote student autonomy**

Academic success has a strong impact on students' life trajectories and future professional prospects. Teachers' interaction style is one of the factors that influence students' learning, engagement and performance. When teachers provide autonomy support and avoid a controlling attitude, students' performance can improve constantly. Previous studies show that students who perceive their teachers as autonomy-supportive engage more in learning activities<sup>13</sup>, experience autonomous types of motivation<sup>14</sup>, and improve their academic performance<sup>15</sup>.

Teachers with a motivational style that encourages student autonomy listen to their perspectives, ask for their opinions and suggestions, show interest in their preferences, praise good contributions to the lesson, do not hesitate to praise progress, offer help and guidance when they are needed and, last but not least, create an environment which stimulates students to take part in activities without being afraid of being corrected and criticized in front of their peers. Teachers who avoid adopting a controlling style of teaching pay more attention to their students' perspective than they pay to their own. They are open to multiple possibilities when it comes to solving a problem and never impose their own solution.

Learner autonomy is fostered by training students in terms of strategy development and learning skills. All language learning strategies are closely connected with students' motivation, control, goal-directedness, autonomy and self-efficacy. Cognitive, mnemonic, metacognitive, affective and social strategies can help them become more autonomous in the learning process. Individual learners have different learning styles, different levels of motivation and engagement, and different interests. They have developed different degrees of independence along

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<sup>12</sup> George Betts, *Autonomous Learner Model*, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Virginie Hospel, Benoit Galand, *Are both classroom autonomy support and structure equally important for students' engagement? A multilevel analysis*, *Learning and Instruction*, 41, 2016, p. 1-10.

<sup>14</sup> Almut Thomas, Florian H. Mueller, *A magic dwells in each beginning? Contextual effects of autonomy support on students' intrinsic motivation in unfamiliar situations*, *Social Psychology of Education*, 2017, p. 791-805.

<sup>15</sup> Samantha W. Bindman, Eva M. Pomerantz, Glen. Roisman, *Do children's executive functions account for associations between early autonomy-supportive parenting and achievement through high school?*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 107(3), 2015, p. 756-770.

their school years. Some learners are more likely to become autonomous than others. Consequently, teachers should know their students very well in order to be able to adopt the most appropriate methods to help them overcome certain barriers and become autonomous.

Teachers can create autonomous learners through the use of appropriate student choices. They can stimulate their curiosity by choosing topics of interest. ESP is supposed to take students' preferences into account. A mechanical engineer, for instance, needs to be able to explain any engine issue to their customer. Therefore, mastering the technical vocabulary connected with the issue in question is crucial. Selecting topics that are in line with the students' future professions is essential. Students know exactly where they will be using English, therefore they know what they want and need to learn. They typically know more about their specific engineering disciplines than their ESP teacher. If they are allowed to contribute to the selection of materials to be taught in the classroom, they will feel motivated to actively participate in the lesson because the content is pertinent to their interests and career goals.

## **5. Autonomous vs. non-autonomous students**

When analyzing ESP students' behaviour from the perspective of being able to work independently, we can divide them into two main groups. First, there are students who are used to being told what to do and always rely on their teacher's instructions. Second, there are students who feel empowered, motivated and highly engaged in the learning process when they are asked to work on their own.

Students' attitude is influenced by a number of factors, such as their age, their language proficiency, their preferred learning styles and their psychological profile.

Older students are usually self-directed. They are well aware of the purpose and the benefits of the learning process. Their motivation comes from internal factors (self-esteem, satisfaction, career aspirations, etc.), not only from external factors (exam pressure, the fear of being corrected in front of their peers, etc.). They also know that the course does not run indefinitely, which is why they try to make the best of it. Besides, some of them are already familiar with the job market requirements, which makes them realize that mastering English is an invaluable asset that can unlock opportunities which are out of reach for those with poor or no English skills. On the minus side, older students have lost the habit of working independently since they have been out of school for several years. Besides, they were exposed to more traditional teaching styles and methods during their school years. The teacher-led instruction hardly fostered autonomy. Therefore, they may need guidance from their teachers in order to adapt to a more autonomous learning environment. Younger students usually exhibit a higher level of independence. They have been in contact with the school environment for years. They are used to learning on their own. They are able to make decisions about their learning, especially if they are encouraged to take the initiative. Since ESP classes

are generally made up of students belonging to different age groups, teachers have to adapt their teaching style to all categories of students. They need to find the most appropriate methods to help them become autonomous learners.

Differences between proficient learners and their less proficient peers are also noticeable when analyzing their attitudes towards autonomy. The former exhibit higher levels of autonomy than the latter. They are able to manage their learning process more effectively and seek out resources without their teacher's intervention. They also exhibit higher levels of self-motivation and self-regulation.

Learning autonomy may also be influenced by students' personality. Extroverted students find a lot of pleasure in collaborative learning experiences because they feel at ease when having social interactions. This can contribute largely to increasing their autonomy. Introverted students find independent study and reflection more enjoyable, which can also lead to higher levels of autonomy.

Students' prior experiences play an important role in students' perception of working autonomously. The Romanian educational system has been traditionally based on teacher-centered instruction, which gives students few opportunities to develop their creativity, critical thinking and self-directing learning skills. Over the past years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of equipping students with the skills which allow them to perform successfully in a dynamic world.

A questionnaire was given to engineering students in order to measure students' autonomy level in ESP classes. It contained a set of 10 questions aimed at identifying levels of student autonomy in speaking, writing and reading activities, levels of student awareness of the importance of being autonomous in the classroom as well as in the workplace, and levels of student motivation in learning. They were also asked to quantify teachers' support in their endeavour to become independent and to rank the main obstacles to autonomy development in the order of importance.

The research participants were 60 engineering students. 52 students were in the 19-23 age group, 7 students were in their thirties and one of them was in his fifties. 41 were male, 19 were female.

The results of the survey showed that 18 students described themselves as being able to work independently, 34 responded that they need guidance from their teacher half of the time and the rest – 8 students – said they are never able to work on their own. 27 students described themselves as autonomous speakers, 24 students responded that they do not need the teacher's intervention when handling a reading task, and only 18 of them said they are able to work autonomously when dealing with a writing assignment. As to the ability to perform independently in the academic and professional world, almost all (57) recognized its undeniable importance. As regards their motivation for learning ESP, 11 students admitted that they learn it in order to pass their exam whereas the other 49 students responded that they learn it because they know it is indispensable for each and every person who has adopted engineering as their career. The participants were also asked about levels of willingness to study outside the classroom. Only 9 of them responded that

they are willing to study on their own to consolidate the knowledge acquired in the classroom and to learn new things. The others responded that they prioritize their specialized courses.

Among the factors that affect learner autonomy, the students ranked their low level of English proficiency (24), the fact that they are used to permanently receiving instructions from their teacher (10), the fear of taking the initiative for various reasons (lack of self-confidence, fear of being corrected, fear of feeling embarrassed in front of their teacher and peers), the fact that teachers are unaware of their individual needs (5), and the use of inadequate materials in the classroom (3).

They were asked to explain why they find it hard to work independently. These are some of their answers:

S1: "I know I have to improve my English, but I don't know how. I don't know what my strengths and weaknesses are. I need my teacher to tell me where to start and what to do."

S2: "I have always been used to learning in a classroom where the teacher is at the centre of attention, rather than the student."

S3: "Every time I have an impulse to take the initiative and do things in my own way, I'm afraid I will be corrected and laughed at."

S4: "I know I have to attend the ESP class and I also know I have to pass my English exam. I feel my freedom in learning is limited."

As far as age differences are concerned, the study revealed that younger students reported higher levels of autonomy than older students.

As to gender, no major differences were noticed between males and females in making their own learning plans. However, there are significant differences between the two groups in their readiness to study English outside the classroom. Thus, the 9 students willing to do extra work at home were all female.

## **6. Conclusion**

Learner autonomy plays a crucial role in achieving academic and professional success, acting as a driver of learner engagement. Autonomous learning stimulates self-directed growth by encouraging students to take control of their learning, which makes them feel free to tailor their learning to their exact needs and preferences. Although learner autonomy is an end towards which each and every student and teacher should work, it is inappropriate to assume that students come to the ESP class armed with the knowledge that allows them to make correct choices as to what, when and how to learn. It is the teacher's responsibility to encourage students to become autonomous learners by offering them a supportive learning environment and by helping them set goals, make choices, manage time effectively, develop their critical thinking, and use information creatively.

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