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DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY WITH COMPUTER ORIENTATED LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (CALLE)

ABSTRACT

The article deals with a very actual problem of shifting the responsibility from teachers to learners while language education. The author gives a rich background to autonomous language learning, describes ways of organizing a learning process in computer orientated environment, outlines the contents of Self access Language Centre (SALC), that was designed by the author as a component of computer orientated environment of future IT specialists language training.

Over the last two decades, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, the former becoming a 'buzz-word' within the context of language learning. It goes without saying, of course, that the shift of responsibility from teachers to learners is the result of a change of the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. What is more, this reshaping of teacher and learner roles has been conducive to a radical change in the age-old distribution of power and authority that used to plague the traditional classroom. But the problem of designing learning special tools for organizing autonomous learning is still vital in Ukrainian education.

So, the aim of the article is to describe some ideas how to implement the idea of self language education.

And the first question to answer is what autonomy is. For a definition of autonomy, let's quote Holec [1981, cited in Pintrich, 1994, p. 1] who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. Generally, the term autonomy can to be used in these ways [Pintrich, 1994, p. 2]:

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;

- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

Autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process.

To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher. This idea is very close to the theory of constructivism, according to which the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world.

Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorization; it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events. That means that every learner constructs his/her own system of knowledge, choosing own strategies and

building own learning trajectories.

According to Leslie P. Steffe [Leslie P. Steffe, 1995] constructivism as a perspective in education that explains how knowledge is constructed in the human being when information comes into contact with existing knowledge that had been developed by experiences. It has roots in cognitive psychology and biology and an approach to education that lays emphasis on the ways knowledge is created in order to adapt to the world. Discovery, hands-on, experiential, collaborative, project-based, and task-based learning are a number of applications that base teaching and learning on constructivism.

In other words, learning on the basis of constructivism does not mean memorization facts and rules, but is aimed at reorganizing and restructuring own knowledge on the basis of getting new experience. Thus, the constructivism changes passive into active: knowledge cannot be taught, but only learned. Accordingly, language learning does not involve internalizing sets of rules, structures and forms; each learner brings her own experience and world knowledge to bear on the target language or task at hand. Apparently, constructivism supports, and extends to cover, psychological versions of autonomy that appertain to learn-

ers' behaviour, attitudes, motivation, and self-concept.

One more important aspect to consider also is changing roles of a teacher and a learner. The teacher is not a dictionary, encyclopedia or a source of readymade information, but a helper or facilitator who encourages learners' autonomous, self learning and self control. Thus, one more shift is present in this paradigm and it is change from teacher control to learners' control.

On the basis of some scientific works analysis [Pintrich, 1994; Schunk, 2005], we outlined some characteristics of an autonomous learner, among them:

- autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
- take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- are good guessers;
- attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
- have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

The next question to answer here is about the conditions for autonomous language learning. First of all, it should be clear that autonomous learning is not a product readymade for use or just a personal quality. It should be claimed that autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions obtain: cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the part of the learner, motivation, attitudes, and knowledge about language learning. So, we, teachers, should aim our students with the language learning strategies. Thus, a special language learning environment should be designed in order to create conditions for individual language learning when every learner could learn in his/her own pace, choose his/her own learning strategies and styles, define own problems, learning material, personal learning preferences, etc. But creating such an environment is not a one-day problem, such environment is a living organism, whose existence should be constantly maintained by all the participants of the learning process. And, it is evidently, that this environment can be designed only on the basis of using information and communication technology with 24/7 access, which means on the Internet.

In our University an attempt to design a computer orientated language learning environment (CALLE) was made. The compo-

nents of the environment are: web-site “How to Teach English with Technology” (<http://shvidko172.narod2.ru>), methodological newspaper English Online (EOL: <https://sites.google.com/site/eolnewspaper/>), Reading English Online Blog (<http://readingenglishonlineblog.blogspot.com/>) and Self Access Language Centre (SALC:

<https://sites.google.com/site/selfaccesslanguagecentre/>). The purpose of CALLE is to provide motivated ESL learners with access to online materials and to promote the use of leaning strategies, language, listening, reading and speaking skills as well as presentation skills, and many other that relate to success in a University setting.

While designing the CALLE we tried to consider such learning strategies (we consider a learning strategy to be a general plan that a learner formulates for achieving a somewhat distant academic goal, it specifies what will be done to achieve the goal, where it will be done, and when it will be done) as cognitive and metacognitive strategies, analysis, planning, learner attitudes, motivation and self esteem. Let’s overview all of these strategies and ways of their realization in CALLE in more detail.

Thus, cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in

ways that enhance learning. Among cognitive language learning strategies we distinguish:

- repetition, imitating other’s speech;
- repetition, when imitating others' speech;
- resourcing, i.e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials;
- translation, that is, using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language;
- note-taking;
- deduction, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules;
- contextualisation, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;
- transfer, that is, using knowledge acquired in the L1 to remember and understand facts and sequences in the L2;
- inferencing, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc);
- question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

As for metacognitive strategies (knowledge that includes all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations). In other words they are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity; so metacognitive strategies are strat-

egies about learning rather than learning strategies themselves. There are some examples of metacognitive strategies:

- directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
- self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
- pre-planning, i.e. identifying the objectives and the ways how they will achieve them;
- planning-in-action, i.e. changing the objectives;
- self-monitoring, i.e. asking yourself the questions “How am I doing?”, “Am I having difficulties with this task?”
- self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success.

Considering learner attitude and motivation, it should be said, that language learning is not merely a cognitive task. The success of language learning depends on learner's sense of self, general attitude towards the world and learning activity, his/her desire to learn, learner attitudes and motivation strategies take the central place in language learning. I goes without saying that learner

attitudes and motivation depends on the success of the language learning process, so the main aim of the teacher to encourage students, praise and motivate them and create comfortable atmosphere to everybody. On these conditions we can speak about motivation, which, in our opinion includes desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task. Closely related to attitudes and motivation is the concept of self-esteem, that is, the evaluation the learner makes of herself with regard to the target language or learning in general. Self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself.

According to that CALLE in general and SALC in particular offer a great variety of tasks, activities, exercises, based on language training, project work, case study, etc.

Considering the ideas mentioned, we outlined some way how to promote learning autonomy. First of all, to develop learner's autonomy it is necessary to compose self-reports and self-reflection. In order to that all the students create reflective learning English blogs and every week they make SWOT analysis and write self-reports. After that they are to comment at least two week-

ly reports of their classmates and answer all the comments of own blog. In our opinion, it is a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This kind of self-report we call introspective that means students analyze their work and progress while performing a task.

Another type of self-report is what has been dubbed as retrospective self-report, since learners are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning. Retrospective self-reports are quite open ended, in that there is no limit put on what students say in response to a question or statement that points to a topic in a general way. There are two kinds of retrospective self-reports: semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires. A semi-structured interview may focus on a specific skill with a view to extracting information about learners' feelings towards particular skills (reading, listening,

etc.), problems encountered, techniques resorted to in order to tackle these problems, and learners' views on optimal strategies or ways of acquiring specific skills or dealing with learning tasks. A structured questionnaire seeks the same information but in a different way: by dint of explicit questions and statements, and then asking learners to agree or disagree, write true or false, and so forth. In our CALLE we widely use both techniques on the pages of the sites and blogs for students and teachers.

In conclusion, it should be said that developing learning autonomy is a long process and a very complicated task for both students and teachers. And on the way of solving it a lot of new tools, predominantly based on the information and communication technologies, a great and powerful language learning environments should be designed and developed.

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