Corina DOBROTĂ, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ESP ADULT COURSES

Introduction

As a teacher of adult learners in ESP, I have often been confronted with the students' over-reliance on the teacher and reluctance to take charge of their own progress in second language acquisition, constantly assuming a passive role inside and outside the classroom. Thus, besides the task of organizing their classroom, providing the linguistic input, designing the curricula, monitoring and evaluating students, teachers also need to develop a sense of responsibility in their learners, so that the latter will understand why and how they learn, thus becoming more willing to adopt an active role in their learning process. Responsible learners, especially if they are adults and need specialized English in their respective fields of study, accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning and are easier to persuade to behave accordingly. They are more willing to cooperate with the teacher and others in the group of peers for everyone's benefit. They are more likely to consciously monitor their own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit, including classroom activities and homework. The next step from responsibility to autonomy is what the teacher and students alike should be striving for, as it empowers learners to function on their own, take active control of their progress, act independently in and outside the classroom, thus becoming successful in their foreign language acquisition.

1.Fundamental Concepts

In point of definition, learner autonomy proves to be quite problematic as a term, as it may be confused with self-instruction and responsibility. Benson (2001) performed an extensive study of the issue, touching upon the following main points: learner autonomy should be considered a capacity or a behaviour; it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; its development may depend on a complementary teacher autonomy, etc.

Holec's definition focuses on the learners' "ability to take charge of [their] own learning" (1981:12). The learner's capacity to act independently, setting goals, selecting materials, methods and tasks, as well as criteria for evaluation is therefore crucial to autonomy in his view.

In Little's terms (1991), learner autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action". It has constantly been argued that, especially in the case of ESP courses, students should be taught in ways which do not promote dependence, leaving them ill-equipped for the professional environment and the actual real-life situations in the world beyond the classroom:

> "Students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programmes of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess their own work and, generally, to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future" (McGarry 1995:1).

Despite the possible controversy that surrounds the term, in an educational context autonomy seems to basically rely on the following characteristics (apud Thanasoulas 2000:1):

a. autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
b. they take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
c. they are willing to take risks, i.e. to communicate in the target language at all costs;

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)

d. they are good guessers;
e. they attend to form as well as to content, i.e. place importance on accuracy as well as on appropriateness;
f. they develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply;
g. they have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

Furthermore, learner autonomy has been closely linked to adult education, in the sense that it equips learners to play an active role in participatory democracy, and has constantly been one of the Council of Europe's educational concerns (Council of Europe 2000/2004). The recently published *European Language Portfolio* stresses the importance of the development of the language learner and the capacity for independent language learning, thus becoming a tool to promote learner autonomy. The autonomous learners are supposed to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, focusing on the ongoing, formative self-assessment (actualized in "can do" checklists attached to the language biography) and the periodic, summative self-assessment of the language passport related to the so-called self-assessment grid in the CEF (Council of Europe 2001: 26-7). In the ESP classroom, students typically have at least basic language knowledge, and their main objective (as well as the teacher's) is to accumulate as much specialized vocabulary and communicative language functions as possible, so as to facilitate their professional communication in working environments.

2.Autonomy in formal language learning

In formal educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating learning. But since language learning crucially depends on language use, adult learners of ESP find themselves constrained by the limited number of classes in which they can practice their skills; some may sometimes profit from the multinational staff at work who requires communication in the foreign language in a professional setting, but this is still a rare occurrence. Their progress as target language users is often hindered by their unrealistic expectations and attempts to save face in front of their peers, but such obstacles are usually surpassed after the adjustment period, when the learning group bonds together as a collectivity and they set down to the learning pace imposed by the majority.

According to Little (1991), the main pedagogical principles in developing autonomy in language learning are as follows:

a. learner involvement (engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process);
b. learner reflection (helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning);
c. appropriate target language use (using the target language as the principal medium of language learning).

3.Promoting autonomy in adult learners of ESP

However, despite the fact that students are adults, the fundamental responsibility for the teaching-learning process rests on the teacher's shoulders; teachers should constantly try and apply these pedagogical principles to their daily work. Here are some possibilities of enhancing learner autonomy through the teacher's activity:

a. communicating exclusively (or as much as possible within the limits of accurate communication with the students) in the target language, requiring the same from the learners in all their interactions (even when non related to the task at hand;
b. clearly stating the objective of each task dealt with in class or given as homework for private study;
c. requiring learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups, thus involving everyone in the learning process;
d. subjecting each learning activity to open discussion, analysis and evaluation (if possible, in the target language);

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)

e. engaging the learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and also as a group;
f. requiring the students to keep written records of their learning, mainly lists of thematic or new vocabulary, useful structures, language functions, whatever texts or projects they may work on or produce themselves;
g. asking the students to take over the teacher's role for a limited period of time in class (conducting a task, monitoring the activity of their peers, etc);
h. regularly delivering a brief report of their progress in front of their peers in the target language, with examples.

4.Specific strategies in learner autonomy development in adult students of ESP

Autonomous learning should by no means be considered "teacherless" learning. Instead, learners are taught how to cope on their own with the possible linguistic challenges they may encounter. In so doing, the teacher may resort to various strategies aimed at facilitating the transfer of control from the teacher to the learners.

Learning strategies, seen as "mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so" (Wenden 1998: 18), may be classified as cognitive and metacognitive (Cook 1993: 114-115).

The cognitive strategies are concerned with: repetition (students imitate the teacher's speech); resourcing (resorting to specialized dictionaries and other materials); translation (using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language, especially at the level of thematic vocabulary); note-taking; deduction (conscious application of the foreign language rules); contextualization (embedding a word or a phrase in a meaningful sequence, as a means of fixating the newly acquired vocabulary); transfer (using knowledge acquired in the native language to remember and understand facts and sequences in the second language); inferencing (matching an unfamiliar word against available information); asking for clarification (usually asking the teacher to explain), etc. Adult learners are more versed in using the entire variety of these strategies, and usually have no difficulty in collaborating with the teacher and their peers in the classroom.

It goes without saying that in autonomous learning, the teacher has to rely more on metacognitive strategies, as they include

> "all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations" (Wenden 1998:34).

Thus, they may easily be seen as skills used for planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning activity:

a. directed attention (deciding in advance to focus on general aspects of a task);
b. selective attention (paying attention to specific aspects of a task);
c. self-monitoring (checking one's own performance while speaking);
d. self-evaluation (appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards);
e. self-reinforcement (rewarding oneself for success).

In the ESP classroom, directed and selective attention can easily be implemented as strategies from the very beginning, as learners usually enjoy being made aware of the language acquisition process; they typically enjoy receiving explicit instruction and grasping the inner mechanism of the learning process, as it helps them gain a sense of reflection and critical thinking regarding their own activity at school. In this sense, the teacher clearly states the objectives (general and specific) at the beginning of each lesson/ task, so that the students have no doubt about what they are expected to be able to do at the end of the lesson/ task. Self-evaluation and self-reinforcement are rather a matter of motivation and not ultimately self-esteem, but all adult students are generally able to assess their own and their peers' performance following a set of criteria of their own choosing.

As far as the punctual techniques are concerned, among the most effective in the ESP class are the following:

a. self-reports;

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)

b. terminological crosswords;
c. reflective journals;
d. internet communication with native speakers.

Self-reports are aimed at collecting data, either introspectively or retrospectively, on how learners go about a learning task, and the mental processes taking place while performing it. They usually focus on a specific skill (such as reading, listening, etc), aiming at extracting the learners' feelings about the task, the problems encountered, the techniques resorted to in order to tackle these problems, as well as the learners' personal views on the optimal strategies or methods to acquiring specific skills or dealing with peculiar tasks. The main advantage of self-reports is that learners' awareness is increased, making them reassess their techniques, objectives and results. As Wenden observes (1998:90),

> "without awareness [they] will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviours and never be fully autonomous".

Based on these reports the teachers can devise new lesson plans or types of tasks, and refine the organisation of their work.

The issue of thematic vocabulary is significantly supported by the use of terminological crosswords, which adult learners of ESP have proved to favour as compared to other types of vocabulary drills. Since they are required to remember and use the proper term in their respective professional jargon, crosswords provide an excellent opportunity to reinforce the proper definition of the terms in question, and their accurate spelling, as well as a means of entertainment.

Reflective journals are another main means of keeping the learners aware of their own learning and progress. Besides getting acquainted with the rules of diary writing in English, they have the opportunity to express themselves in writing about regular, real-life events occurring during school, work, travel, social activities, or an event that required an exchange of cross-cultural information. In terms of skills, keeping a journal and logging the daily occurrences increases the writing ability, allowing the student to focus on areas of interest, that might prove challenging in point of speaking. Undoubtedly, for diary-keeping to be fully effective, the learner needs either the feedback of the teacher or the assistance of a native speaker who would clearly point out the mistakes and help rectify them.

This method is highly beneficial not only for the student, but also for the teacher. According to Eken (2001), the pros of reflective journals are multiple, as they help:

1. promote the creation of an effective learning and teaching environment full of genuine interaction, sympathy, appreciation and respect, and give learners a real sense of achievement;

2. study the process of teaching and learning, raise learners' awareness of their own language learning. It may also help teachers cater better to their learners' needs and expectations and make any necessary adjustments. Moreover, it could be used as a research tool for investigation into the learning strategies learners already use or are in the process of acquiring;

3. record events and ideas for the purpose of later reflection. As a result, it may help teachers guide their actions by reflection and critical thinking and arrive at their own judgments as what works and what does not work in their classrooms. Additionally, journal-writing may help learners discover things about themselves, their learning difficulties or anxieties, think critically about their weaknesses and strengths;

4. promote a process of discovery teaching (or inductive teaching), where a process of writing itself helps trigger insights about teaching/learning, consequently helping learners develop the awareness of methodology;

5. tap into affective factors (giving a sense of freedom. Journal-writing could be treated as a means of relaxation. Besides, receiving immediate feedback makes learners feel valued and increases their self-confidence.) and learners' own perceptions (they develop critical thinking

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)

skills and gain intelectual maturity, that is, are able to draw conclusions, make generalisations, suggest solutions).

Internet communication is also highly profitable for adult learners who spend most of their working day in front of the computer and are used to finding information by resorting to the available search motors online. As part of their second language acquisition, they should be encouraged to use voice-chat programs or instant messaging in order to increase their exposure to native manners of communications at their own pace and on their own accord, without the pressure of the classroom environment or the constraints of the timetable. On the other hand, fashionable social networks, such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter or vrtual games such as Second Life may also serve as valuable tools in enhancing communication in the foreign language. Basically, students are encouraged to improve their linguistic ability independently by getting actively involved in all sorts of communication forms online, including discussion boards, interactive blogs, online forums, online quizzes, and podcasts, which are all free and within easy reach, offer instant response and relieve the burden of saving face in class. Error correction is performed in a friendly, pressure-free manner, while learners keep pursuing their own interests in an enjoyable manner.

Conclusions

To sum up, adult learners of ESP are the best candidates, due to their age and expectations, for the implementation of autonomous learning, which primarily aims at making them more aware of their own learning process, in point of objectives, strategies, techniques, and actual results. Taking charge of their learning process, under the supportive supervision of the teacher, students gradually increase their capacity to act independently, becoming capable of critical assessment on everything concerning them.

In the formal language environment, learners should be engaged in sharing responsibility, and thinking critically about planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities. Autonomy can therefore be fostered by explicit instruction, clear delimitation of objectives, identification and pursuit of areas of interest, promotion of cooperative learning an open and relaxed atmosphere, constant self-assessment of progress. Among the specific metacognitive strategies used in the ESP classes, the most effective are self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-reinforcement. At the level of the techniques directed at promoting learner autonomy, teachers may require their students to focus on self-reports, terminological crosswords, reflective journals, and internet communication of various types.

Faced with the pressure of learning professional English as part of their professional requirements, adult learners of ESP need to be given the necessary guidance to become autonomous learners, able to cope independently with the various challenges in their working environment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Harlow: Longman/ Pearson Education;

Conttia, L.M.W. (2007). *The Influence of Learner Motivation on Developing Autonomous Learning in an English-for-Specific-Purposes Course.* Retrieved April 29th, 2009 from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/thesis_lai_conttia.pdf ;

Cook, V. (1993). *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition.* London: MacMillan;

Council of Europe (2000/2004). *European Language Portfolio (ELP): Principles and Guidelines . With added explanatory notes.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Frameork of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;

Eken, A. N. (2001). *An inner journey,* The English Teaching professional 19, 48-50.

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon;

Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems.* Dublin: Authentik;

McGarry, D. (1995). *Learner Autonomy 4: The Role of Authentic Texts.* Dublin: Authentik;

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)

Nunan, D. (2000). *Autonomy in Language Learning*. Retrieved June 29th, 2009 from http: //www.nunan.info/ presentations/autonomy_lang_learn.pdf;
Scharle, A and Anita Szabo. (2000). *Learner Autonomy. A Guide to developing learner responsibility.* Cambridge Textbooks for Language Teachers, Series Editor Penny Ur. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;
Thanasoulas, D. (2000). *Autonomy and Learning: An Epistemological Approach.* Applied Semiotics Journal, Volume 4, Issue 10. University of Toronto, Canada, pp. 115-132;
Wenden, A. (1998). *Motivation in Foreign and Second Language Learning: An Interactive Perspective.* Educational and Child Psychology, 11, pp.17-84.

ABSTRACT
Apparently, the primary objective in ESP adult courses is making sure that the learners accumulate the necessary ESP knowledge in order to communicate successfully in this area of their expertise, so that to be able to function autonomously in meeting the various demands of foreign language command in a specialized field. In order to provide learners with this type of autonomy, generally defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981), the ESP teacher needs to boost their confidence and develop their skills, by means of various teaching strategies and techniques, among which the most applicable seem to be the following: self-reports, terminological crosswords, keeping reflective journals, internet communication with native speakers of English, such as discussion boards, online games, interactive blogs or forums.

BDD-A3422 © 2009 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:04 UTC)