Leave Learners Alone

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There is a growing interest in and acknowledgement among EFL teaching professionals of the importance and benefits of learner autonomy in different cultural contexts (Sinclair 2000; Little 2000; Dam 2000; Wenden 1991). But even in Western culture this presupposes a renewed focus on the learners and teachers and the way they interact and influence the process of learning. Some researchers have related the awareness of the processes in the language classroom to the possibility of empowering learners with a real voice in decision-making (Eken 1999). This learner-centered approach means that teaching is based on learners' cultural inclinations, emotional reactions, educational preferences and learning habits. As teachers become genuinely interested in the learners and their insights, they 'actually become 'learners' of learners' (Eken 1999:241).

This issue is far from being novel. It has long been a core educational value. As early as the fourth century BC the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates formulated a new understanding of the role and importance of dialogue and debate in the search of truth and knowledge. According to Socrates knowledge belonged to no one, it was the result of a dialogue in which the participants enjoyed equal rights. Each participant's opinion was as important as the other's. Thus Socrates eliminated the teacher's privileged point of view and his dominant position in the learning process. Moreover, the teacher and learner shared equal rights and responsibilities (Fearn 2001).

In terms of language learning such learning 'without being taught' or 'self-directed learning' means that learners take their 'own decisions with respect to the objectives to achieve, the resources and techniques to use, evaluation, and management over time of the learning programme, with or without help from an outside agent' (Holec 1996:102).

This pre-occupation with the language learner has led to the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages by the Council of Europe. It represents a complete break with earlier approaches to language teaching and learning. The learner is not seen as someone 'engaged in a never-ending struggle to learn ever more complex aspects of

language. The language learnt must be of immediate practical application in the world outside the classroom' (Morrow 2004: 5). The emphasis is on using languages for real communication which can be accomplished with only partial mastery of the language. CEF has an important role for all the people involved in language teaching and learning because it sees language learning not only as learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, i.e. linguistic competence. Its main objective is: 'to promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgment of action, combined with social skills and responsibility' (CEF 2001:4). As language teachers of modern learners we must have in mind the underlying principles of the CEF: 'the involvement of the learner and learner motivation as a central feature; the idea of cooperative relationship between learner and teacher; and a realistic way of fitting the course to the resources available, not to an abstract goal of perfection' (Heyworth 2004:14).

Having outlined the context of modern language learning and its central themes and issues we are interested to find out whether the objective of learner autonomy is really achievable. We started asking questions which have been raised long ago: 'Does learner autonomy work?'(Sinclair 2000:13), 'How might autonomous learning be carried out?', 'With what results?' (Dam 2000:48, Гузеев 2004: 11). As an answer we focus on such practical aspects as the design of learner-centered materials and a methodology for implementing autonomy and independence.

Our ideas derive primarily from our own classes in Cultural Studies of Britain, the USA and Russia at Varna Free University. Over the years we have been concerned with defining such methods for language learning for specific and academic purposes which can be used as instruments for students' involvement and collaborative learning. While selecting up-to-date methods, approaches and forms we have applied a number of criteria. The methods must:

- create an atmosphere where our students feel at ease;
- stimulate students' interests and desire to use the foreign language;
- develop the necessity to learn and turn success into an achievable goal;
- relate to students' personality, involve their emotions, feelings and experiences in the learning process, correspond to their needs in order to stimulate their linguistic, cognitive and creative abilities;

- turn students into active participants, interacting with the other participants;
- create situations in which the teacher is not the central figure;
- encourage students to learn the language at the level of their own physical, intellectual and emotional abilities, which ensures differentiated and individualized learning and teaching;
- encompass a variety of forms: individual, pair, group and team work.

At tertiary level the Communicative Language Task and Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking have been widely used. But these methods allow only partially for our goals to be reached. A method which has met all our requirements is project work. But why could a method whose origin dates back to the beginning of the 20th century suit our purposes and match modern learners' expectations of the learning process? There are several reasons:

First, project work is autonomously planned and accomplished work by the learners. Language communication is naturally interwoven in the intellectual and emotional context of another activity – game, questionnaire, journal, poster, interview, research, Power Point presentation, etc.

Second, project work is a creative process. Learners alone or under the teacher's guidance try to solve a problem which is of professional interest for them. Independently they have to make a transfer of knowledge, habits and skills in a new context. Thus a specific atmosphere is created in the language classroom where learners use the foreign language naturally and freely as if using their native language. Therefore learners are expected to concentrate not only on the linguistic accuracy, but mainly on the content of their message and the overall impression their presentation creates.

Third, during the preparation of the project the learners are active partners, not passive participants carrying out the teacher's instructions. Project work presupposes that every learner even the weakest and unmotivated has the chance to show his/her creative abilities and be active and autonomous. Project work gives the possibility to stop emphasizing the formal character of language learning and to stimulate learner cooperation in order to have practical results.

Fourth, project work changes the functional roles that learners and teachers traditionally have. Learners actively participate in decision-making, i.e. the choice of topic, organization and content, while teachers become consultants and assistants.

Our study is based on several projects: Russian Diplomats in Bulgaria, Parliament, Separation of Powers, Globalization of World Politics. They were carried out by second, third and fourth year students in International Relations and Political Science at Varna Free University as part of their language classes in Russian and British and American Studies. The students were at different levels in terms of linguistic competence which varied from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate (levels B1 to B2 according to CEF).

We begin developing a project by working out a technological card of the project. It is used as a map giving details of the activities and instructions about the timing of every task in the project. It is given to every participant and also hung up in the language classroom to be referred to when needed. We think that it should include seven stages:

1. defining the project's problem, its type, tasks and number of participants;
2. proposing hypotheses or sub-problems and discussion to solve the main problem; allocating group tasks, discussing the possible research methods, information gathering;
3. working autonomously on the individual or group tasks;
4. interim discussions of the data collected in groups or with the teacher;
5. project defense and opposition;
6. group discussion, result evaluation, conclusions.

Developing a project requires good planning and following certain steps. Here is our suggestion for the stages of the actual work on a project:

1. Defining group members and their leaders;
2. Vocabulary presentation and practice;
3. Searching for additional information;
4. Group work for task allocation and strategies for action;
5. Language work on a main text;

6. Step-by-step control of the sub-groups, analysis and discussion of the results from the interim activity;

7. Information exchange, teacher consultation, summing up and conclusion;

8. Project defense;

9. Reflection: evaluation of outcomes, conclusion for future projects.

Students take an active part in the assessment of the process and results of their own and their peers' work by completing a presentation feedback form, discuss them and give arguments for their evaluation. Their opinion is as important as their teacher's. This is a very important stage because it helps students view their work critically and build a positive attitude towards the project itself and language learning.

Teacher's and Learner's Role

The teacher has two main functions: to manage the process and to consult. He/she introduces project work to students, defines the target and formulates the topic of the project. The teacher tries to provoke students' interest, to create the conditions for group work. Students create the basic text with the teacher's assistance. From this moment on the teacher leaves the initiative and responsibility for the project success to the students in the group. Then they select texts for additional reading. Learners set the learning objectives autonomously and participate in the choice of topic and strategy as well as evaluation of the outcomes. Thus learning becomes a self-directed process.

Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions

When we started doing our theoretical research and implementing its results we had no doubts that successes will outnumber the problems in an autonomous learning environment. Many of our students were enthusiastic about creative work. Their experience with exchange programmes has deepened their learner responsibility. Others were generally happy to exchange roles with the teacher when evaluating their own and their peers' performance. However, there was a tiny group who thought that project work was a waste of time because they just lacked time or preferred teacher dominated instruction. Nevertheless we think that learners can benefit from project work in two important senses: cooperation and self- and peer-evaluation.

In conclusion we wish to point out that however good a teacher and / or a curriculum may be students will never learn a foreign language unless they aim to develop their individual learning strategies so that they become autonomous learners and be confident to continue learning on their own life long. If we teach learners how to learn, then they would not be at a loss in real life situations as they would be armed with strategies to deal with whatever comes their way.

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