

Training teachers to use the European Language Portfolio

Project C6 of the ECML 2nd medium-term programme (ELP_TT)

Learner autonomy: drawing together the threads of self-assessment, goal-setting and reflection

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Overview

- Learner autonomy: a working definition and its implications
- Learner autonomy, the ELP and the CEF
- Why is learner autonomy important?
- What must the teacher do? Three pedagogical principles and their operationalization
- Some questions for discussion

Learner autonomy: a working definition

- The “*ability to take charge of one’s own learning*”
- “This ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way”
- “*To take charge of one’s learning* is to have ... the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning ...”

(Holec 1981, p.3)

Implications of this definition

- The first step towards autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one’s own learning
- Acceptance of responsibility is a matter of conscious intention
- Learner autonomy entails the development of explicit skills of reflection, analysis and evaluation
- Learner autonomy means learning how to learn
- An autonomous learner is a motivated learner

Learner autonomy and the ELP

According to the *Principles and Guidelines*

- The ELP reflects the Council of Europe’s concern with
 - the development of the language learner [which by implication includes the development of learning skills]
 - the development of the capacity for independent language learning
- The ELP
 - is a tool to promote learner autonomy

Learner autonomy and the CEF

- "In its most general sense, *savoir-apprendre* is the ability to observe and participate in new experience and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary"
- "Ability to learn has several components, such as language and communication awareness; general phonetic skills; study skills; and heuristic skills"
(CEF, pp.106f.)

Why is learner autonomy important?

- Autonomy – "feeling free and volitional in one's actions" (Deci 1995, p.2) – is a basic human need that is as relevant to learning as to any other aspect of life
- Autonomy is nourished by, but in turn nourishes, our intrinsic motivation, our proactive interest in the world around us
- Learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation

Why is learner autonomy important?

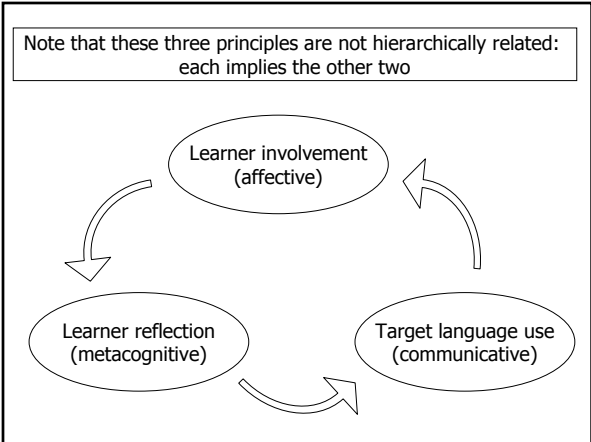
- Because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective (conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous)
- The efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom

Autonomy in formal language learning

- In all formal learning, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning
- Language learning depends crucially on language use: we can learn to speak only by speaking, etc.
- Thus in formal *language* learning, the scope of learner autonomy is always constrained by what the learner can *do* in the target language

Autonomy in formal language learning

- Three pedagogical principles:
 - **Learner involvement:** *engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective dimension)*
 - **Learner reflection:** *helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimension)*
 - **Appropriate target language use:** *autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin (the communicative dimension)*



What does the teacher do?

- Use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of her learners
- Involve her learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms
- Help her learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language

What does the teacher do?

- Require her learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups
- Require her learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce
- Engage her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language

Questions for discussion

- “[It] is not the function of the Framework to promote one particular language teaching methodology, but instead to present options” (CEF, p.142) Consider those options (CEF, p.143; provided on a separate handout) and answer these questions:
 - Which of the options best characterize language teaching practice in your context?
 - How many of them are compatible with learner autonomy as elaborated in this presentation?
 - Which of them are most likely to accommodate work on the ELP?
- How would you encourage learner autonomy in your context?

References

- Deci, E. (with R. Flaste), 1995: *Why we do what we do: understanding self-motivation*. New York: Penguin.
- Holec, H., 1981: *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe)
