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SOME FACTORS CONDITIONING LEARNER AUTONOMY: SOCIAL CHANGES AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY

This paper aims to address the issue of modern influences on the learning and teaching English as a foreign language. I will argue that the use of the influences may lead to more autonomous learning and through that to more effective language acquisition.

The study is mainly concerned with teaching a specific age group of learners, namely secondary and university/college students. Therefore, any assumptions or conclusions made in the article will concern the above mentioned group.

The brief paper is merely meant to highlight some points related to the issue and I would like to stress that in order to fully exploit the vast area, which, at times, crosses over the boundaries of a linguistic study, a more thorough investigation is needed. The problem of modern influences also calls for some classroom experimental study which is still ahead.

Discussing learner autonomy it is worth defining the term. In more general terms it means being able to take responsibility for one's own learning. In more specific terms learner autonomy also means developing learning strategies, using self access resources, negotiating grades and material with learners.

There is a number of factors that contribute to autonomous learning. Riley and Gremo (1995) enumerate the following ones:

1. minority rights movements and their influence on education,
2. reaction against behaviourism: more emphasis on personal experience,
3. interests in minority rights,
4. development of technology: self study equipment,
5. social and economic changes: calls for greater flexibility on the market.

This paper will be mainly concerned with a way of implementing learner autonomy with the use of technology and media and also some space will be devoted to the social changes; that is, the points four and five of the above

mentioned criteria. I will also refer to some cultural factors which might serve as tools for fostering learner autonomy.

The idea of a more autonomous approach to learning has recently become a very popular one. The development of all areas of science and humanities and the vastness of material and work being done in any of field of knowledge call for a constant development, knowledge update and frequently adjustment to new situations. One can easily find oneself in a situation when new skills or new knowledge is needed in order to comply with the requirements. The ability to enhance one's skills and knowledge is a great asset both in the work market and also in any situation a person can find themselves. Being able to look for knowledge is one of the essential characteristics of autonomous learning.

The use of media and new technologies with the young generation, accustomed to using them on a daily basis, seems appealing. And indeed it is. A classroom where a sample text from a target language magazine or a bit of an authentic video material is used increases students' interest in the lesson. This suggests the use of the same methods for enhancing learner autonomy because of their relative availability. Students may be asked to look for knowledge using different media, e.g. browsing the Internet, referring to newspapers or magazines, watching TV programmes, etc.

Before we move on to suggesting some specific methods of using the media in language teaching let us ask some questions first. Why is it so that using media is so attractive? What makes it such a powerful tool for language learning?

The world of media is often closely connected with the popular culture that overwhelms so much the television, radio, magazines and the Internet. Being exposed to the popular culture, almost at any point, young people are especially susceptible to influences from these sources. Cheung (2000:56) notices that:

[...] in the process of growing up, students need to identify with something and a large proportion of them choose the popular culture, which being readily accessible everywhere and highly acceptable to young people, acts as a bond between them providing means that are relevant to their lives.

White (1995), quoted in Cheung, claims that for most young people popular culture serves as a valuable tool that helps them to cope with the difficult task of building and maintaining the identity.

Another advantage of using the popular culture is its pervasiveness. The fact that various manifestations of the popular culture such as songs, films or other widely advertised commercial products are omnipresent makes them powerful and easy-accessible tools for teaching and learning especially the English language which, more often than not, is a vehicle for spreading the popular culture.

The availability and a natural interest in popular culture events make it a great ally in achieving the goal of more autonomous learning. The use of the

popular culture increases students' level of motivation so much desired in the process of learning. As we read in Cheung (2000:56): *Popular culture touches the lives of students, and grows out their natural experience and interest.*

If a satisfactory level of learner motivation could be achieved, then this would naturally lead to greater autonomy and finally better command of the target language.

Another important issue concerning fostering autonomous learning is creating an appropriate environment. Esch (1996) mentions the following five criteria for the learner autonomy environment:

choice
flexibility
adaptability/modifiability
reflectibility/negotiability
shareability

The first criterion offers students genuine alternatives as far as the materials, modes of studying, learning strategies and tasks are concerned.

Flexibility means being able to go back easily to the starting point when a wrong option is chosen. The criterion of adaptibility concerns the way of organizing stock of materials to suit both learners and those who organize the studying (e.g. a tutor, teacher or librarian). The materials should also be easily recognisable and teachers and learners should be able to play with them. The element of reflection or looking back and reviewing should also be present and the room for negotiation of ways of learning or methods of work should also be provided. The criterion of shareability refers to e.g. the idea of pairing students with different languages.

Discussing the use of the popular culture with reference to the above mentioned criteria it seems that they can be really well fulfilled reaching to the resources of the popular culture. The abundance of materials offered by the television, radio, newspapers or the Internet allows plenty of room for choice, flexibility and adaptability. The same refers to the criterion of reflexibility/negotiability.

Also, students using the Internet as a medium of communication comply with the condition of shareability.

Let us turn now to the specific discussion of the potential power of the use of media in teaching the English language. Here I would like to pay special attention to the television, as it is probably the most powerful medium.

An interesting discussion of the potential of the television and especially satellite television can be found in Meinhof (1999). The author discusses the use of some TV genres (news, soap operas, game shows and adverts) in the context of learning a foreign language. The study offers some useful methods of employing the television in the process of learning. Almost any of the advice

suggested can contribute to learner autonomy also through the very fact that it develops the use of the learning strategies such as seeking opportunities for practice or contact with the target language or promoting cross cultural understanding or tolerance for different values and concepts. Apart from that, most of the activities can be repeated, done outside of the classroom without the need to refer to a teacher.

Meinhof mentions the application of the videotext. This includes film and other programmes' subtitling, primarily offered for the hard of hearing but also suitable for language learners to supplement and support listening strategies. The video text is also a source of some useful information, however it seems that its main advantage is that it presents the language learner with more linguistic input.

The fact that a great deal of TV material is not culture specific but very often of global nature provides room for comparison between the same kinds of programmes run often simultaneously on different TV channels. An example of this would be the almost simultaneous screening of some soap operas, sitcoms, dramas or game shows on e.g. British, German, Swedish and Polish TV channels (e.g. *Ally McBeal, Eastenders, Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* or *Big Brother*).

The same feature may be a good starting point for cross cultural comparisons and also may form an element of media analysis.

Meinhof also points to the interconnectedness between TV material and other media. An example of that could be some popular soap operas or sitcoms, which have their web sites (learners-viewers can find more about their favourite characters, actors or the development of the plot and also exchange e-mails with other viewers virtually anywhere on the globe). The productions are discussed, previewed, reviewed and listed in newspapers, magazines and TV guides again providing opportunities for enhancing reading skills and understanding.

Discussing modern influences that may enhance the autonomy in learners one cannot overlook the whole area of computer technology. Some of its applications, such as the use of the Internet and e-mail messages, have already been mentioned. But apart from them, the computer technology opens up a wide range of other learning opportunities through the use of various multimedia software. The application of computer software in learning a foreign language could serve as a topic for an extensive study but here I would like to draw attention only to some aspects from the point of view of developing a learner autonomy.

The most obvious characteristic that is relevant to the issue of autonomy is that computer materials are very often designed to be studied outside of the classroom. Computer software serves here as a practice material and also a tool for language assessment and comparison. Modern computer software lets the user monitor their progress and provide opportunities for reflection on the work already done thereby developing learning strategy use, an element of

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autonomous learning. Computers with accompanying software may form a part of resources of a self access centre.

At this point I would like to touch upon some cultural considerations about living in the age of technology and media. I think that these modern influences are well summarised under the common name of postmodernity.

In this context it is argued that the subject of postmodernity is best understood as (Featherstone 1991:5, quoted in Usher and Edwards (1994)):

> *[...] the ideal type channel hopping MTV viewer who flips through different images of such speed that she/he is unable to chain the signifiers together into a meaningful narrative, he/she merely enjoys the multiphrenic intensities and sensations of the surface of images.*

This sounds like many contemporary teenagers or even adults equally, or perhaps even more, interested in hyperreality as in reality.

The situation depicted above becomes more and more pervasive. The aesthetic and moral assessments may vary but whatever the judgement we cannot argue with the reality where most people are so much engulfed by the world of information.

Whether we approve of it or not the situation calls for giving it a chance of being utilized for the sake of achieving some educational goals including more effective language learning.

A few words should also be said about experiential learning which has become a dominant discourse in western countries in education and with the new political and social changes is gaining ground in Poland.

The emphasis here is put on experience, constructing and negotiating knowledge through being active rather than passive, a controller rather than being a subject of education. Through these ideas experiential learning shares a lot with learner autonomy.

It is interesting to note that these ideas seem attractive to different political and social orientations. The support for experiential learning comes from different sources and for different reasons. Within the European perspective Usher and Edwards (1994) claim that new right are ready to accept the idea putting the emphasis on the practical and adaptive element. The new middle class see the benefits in the personal development.

In Poland the educational changes are still in progress and we are at a point of transition from the "traditional" to more modern system of education, quite likely based on experiential learning. Neither is the system of the social classes mature enough to make here any comparisons between the consideration concerning the situation in the EU and Poland. The discussion will probably start when the social and political systems become better established and more attention will be given to the issues of education.

Another issue here is the readiness and willingness on the part of language teachers and educators to accommodate the new paradigm. However, there is a

growing interest, understanding and approval for more autonomous teaching. This is probably facilitated by the instinctive feeling that the old system does not stand up to the test of the modern times and requirements. Many teachers realise that in order to be flexible and competitive in the work market one needs to be able to enhance their qualifications and know how to gain knowledge and new skills.

The above discussion is just a brief presentation concerning the questions at the juncture of learner autonomy, social changes and modern technology. The problems only sketched here need further analysis and also some closer examination in the form of classroom research is needed.

However, it seems that the changes still going on in the Polish educational system and the way of teaching and learning will supply plenty of room for in-depth analysis. It seems inevitable that we will witness more and more extensive use of media and computer technology leading to greater learner autonomy.

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