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## USING DIGITAL TOOLS TO ENCOURAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY

We all live in a fast-changing world where the ideas of lifelong learning and student-centered approach have become a necessity rather than an option. Nevertheless, it can be an elusive goal without developing autonomy in learners from an early age. By *learner autonomy* we will understand «the ability to take charge of one's learning» [1, p. 3]. The main idea behind learner autonomy is that students should take responsibility for their own learning, rather than be dependent on the teacher. It is presupposed that student-centered approach implies making learning motivational and inspiring. It led us to the idea that motivation should come from within, thus making students responsible for their own learning. At the same time, we cannot deny the impact that technology has on our lives. It has dramatically changed not only our way of living, but also our way of perceiving the reality, especially in post-COVID times.

Thus, teachers should encourage students to use technological tools both inside and outside the classroom to create the immersion-learning environment. At the same time, technology can serve the purpose of enhancing learner autonomy.

The process of teaching since COVID-19 times has become very complex in its essence. According to P. Jarvis, «teaching is changing; it is being forced to

change by the dominant globalizing forces of social change» [2, p. 36]. Though it was said long before modern global challenges, it reflects the idea that teachers should be always aware of the latest changes and ready to react accordingly.

One of the crucial issues in defining the concept of learner autonomy is isolating the dispositions that an autonomous learner should display. According to V. Chan's classification [3, p. 506], an autonomous learner should set his/her learning goals, identify and develop learning strategies to achieve these goals; develop study plans; reflect on his/her learning which includes identifying problem areas and means of addressing these problems; identify and select relevant resources and necessary support; assess his/her progress and define his/her own criteria for evaluating performance and learning (including strategies, materials etc.).

One of the challenges lies in establishing the degree of autonomy that would be appropriate for both teachers and students in their specific learning and teaching contexts. My American colleague, Mrs Fitchpatrick, a teacher of English from George Junior High School in Springdale, Arkansas mentioned three different levels of autonomy according to students' capacity to work independently during COVID period. The school gave the students the option to be virtual, blended, or onsite, and the lessons were created to give students who are at home and students who are in class the same opportunity to learn. They used Google Classroom to collect assignments, Screencastify to help them understand instructions, Coggle as a way to take notes, and VoiceThread as a way for students to reflect on their work. My another colleague, Beena Koirala, an academic supervisor and a mentor of Gaindakot English School from Nepal, uses MOOCs with her students to develop language skills outside the classroom. In my teaching context, I found this step appropriate only for highly motivated students who can work independently at their own pace. Definitely, learner autonomy does not appear overnight. Instead, it should be cultivated gradually to allow a smooth transition from one stage to another. Douglas Brown believes that encouraging students to make their own choices starting with the elementary level can give students «a sense of 'ownership' of their learning and thereby add to their intrinsic motivation» [4, p. 147].

Fostering learner autonomy turns to be a rather intricate process requiring commitment and seriousness not only from teachers but also from students. That is why the concept of learner autonomy always implies two factors: freedom and responsibility. Students consciously monitor their own progress and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit [5, p. 29]. As a teacher, I had to overcome the students' reluctance for self-regulation, and I did it by implementing attractive and intuitively easy digital tools to make learning process 'unavoidably accessible' for students. However, educational technology tends to presuppose autonomy rather than foster it. Therefore, the teacher should offer support and suggestions, helping students to learn how to use digital tools for language learning, encourage learners to look for support online, which can be found on the Help pages or a community space. I would recommend video tutorials, as they

appeared to be useful in my context because we were unable to communicate physically offline at that time. I also provided support to my students organizing meet-up sessions in Zoom to discuss progress and share results with peers.

Today we have a diversity of environments ranging from adaptive learning systems through mobile apps to social networking sites and MOOCs. Some digital tools contribute to collaboration and interaction, others can be a great source of motivation and students' engagement. There are special apps for enhancing all language areas separately and in complexity. When educators consider using digital tools in order to develop learner autonomy, they should pay attention to those that will stimulate students' intrinsic motivation and independence and that are initially designed for independent use. When autonomy and structures are balanced, learners have as much freedom as they need and can make choices. For example, networking digital technologies enable language learners to collaborate and create content online. They have given rise to new ways in which learners are able to express their autonomy. When technology became more accessible, teachers started to encourage students to make their own recordings or produce their own films. In this way students became actively involved in the process of learning.

Since our goals as teachers are to make learners function better while studying, to ensure that learners will continue to acquire knowledge after formal studies and to create learning opportunities without imposing a method, we need to find a better way to teach a foreign language nowadays. Technology can definitely encourage learner autonomy as it provides access to language outside the classroom, gives opportunities to develop skills, helps to plan, reflect and assess learning more systematically and efficiently. In the article a number of examples of digital tools are given that proved to be effective not only as a way of language development but also as a source of forming and developing learner autonomy outside the classroom.

Firstly, I implemented Google Classroom into my teaching practice to make learning trajectory visual and accessible for each student. Apart from using LMS at school, I would recommend applying some elements of flipped classroom to practice autonomous learning. A *flipped classroom* is an instructional strategy and a type of blended learning which aims to increase student engagement and learning by having students complete readings at their home and work on live problem-solving during class time. A teacher's interaction with students in a flipped classroom can be more personalized and less didactic, and students are actively involved in knowledge acquisition and construction as they participate in and evaluate their learning

For developing speaking skills, my students have learnt to use *Voicethread* and *Flipgrid*. These apps serve to create and share conversations around the topic, discuss documents and photos, record videos with their answers. Younger students have found *Voki* and *ChatterPix* appealing where they can create characters and add voices to them. Not all learners like using the same digital tools, so giving options to choose from can help motivation while allowing them to take some responsibility for their learning.

The teacher can also give options for tasks using digital tools, for example, a task where learners are supposed to use the past tenses with topics to choose from: talk about a happy childhood memory, talk about a holiday you had or talk about a fun day out you had last month. Learners choose tasks that motivate them, helping to keep them engaged with their language learning.

The next step was to show the students some useful apps to practice and review vocabulary based on memory building techniques. Regardless of the mode of teaching, learning new words is mainly an autonomous process, so *Quizlet*, *Quiz your English* and *LearningApps* appeared to be indispensable in EL instruction. To do this as effectively as possible, it is important to understand how the tool can help so they can use it with a clear learning goal in mind. A teacher can create a list of statements to choose from in order to explain how exactly different features of a tool can help students to achieve their goals.

An important part of developing learner autonomy is reflection. Learners need to be able to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and identify progress. I would recommend starting practicing it in class, because not all learners can reflect successfully without support at first. As for digital tools, it can be very productive to use real-time quizzes and polls, which can serve two purposes: a teacher can get feedback from learners, while learners can reflect on their learning. I used *Kahoot* and *Mentimeter* to create open questions or closed true/false or multiple-choice questions and *Padlet* as a collaborative site to share their reflections. Learners can keep a reflective learning journal, in which they write after each lesson, unit or module. A teacher should encourage them to write about what they have learned, what they found easy or difficult and what they need to do better; to set learning goals and think about how they will achieve those goals. A useful tool for keeping an online journal is *Penzu*, which is private but learners can share pages with a teacher.

In conclusion, my research shows that digital tools can help learners become more independent as they do not have to rely only on teachers for input and practice. Autonomous learners can set their own goals and plan how to achieve them; they tend to learn more efficiently and to be more motivated. However, not all learners are able to follow this route, so they may need more detailed guidance from teachers. However, on condition that they get necessary support, learners can be more independent and develop their language skills beyond the classroom. Paradoxically, autonomy seems to flourish in restricted environment, while in less constrained contexts students have difficulty dealing with a requirement to take responsibility for their own learning. One more advantage is that students get access to many online resources. Now they can choose the one that will best suit their goals and find other, more efficient, means of acquiring information which may differ from the way it is presented by the teacher or in the textbook. For me as a researcher, it was genuinely interesting to see how educational technology can help to develop learner autonomy and how learner autonomy helps to use digital tools.

## LITERATURE

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