Olga Ischenko, Svitlana Kulieznova

ENHANCING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING TECHNIQUES

ABSTRACT. The article covers some new challenges put in front of educational processes in the sphere of education. Under the conditions of the modern situation in Ukraine the authors analyze both perspectives and obstacles in the introduction of blended learning into practice. Special attention is given to the problem of teaching students become more autonomous during the foreign language course at a higher educational institution as well as teaching them to keep control of their outcome. Apart from this the article also refers to the idea of a three-level structure of an educational program that functions on a micro, meso and macro levels.

The integration of Ukrainian higher education into multicultural European Higher Educational Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area is being supported academically by infusing international educational standards in primary, secondary, and higher education curricula. The Western vector of the educational reform in Ukraine as well as the representation of languages in education and internationalization of higher education is being actively discussed at teachers' conferences and forums. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MESU) is supportive of faculties' and students' mobility and encourages international agreements in higher education. The growing popularity of lifelong education has been transforming a well-trodden path of learning in the language classroom giving more space to self-access language learning approaches. The

focus is now shifting from the teaching itself to the psychological relation of a learner to the procedure of learning and curricula. Many educational institutions in Ukraine claim to be putting student-centered learning into practice, although they are actually not. Without better understanding of how Ukrainian lecturers can incorporate the concept of learner autonomy in their pedagogy any introduced idea hardly will be taken up by lecturers, particularly a concept not so congenial in language and culture.

This article aims:

- to consider the influence of intercultural integration on the popularization of autonomous learning,

- to overview the strategies on how student-centered learning can be applied as a principle of teaching and assessment,

- to research into the effectiveness of blended learning,

- to bring forward some perspectives of blended learning.

With an increasing number of Ukrainian students pursuing an international qualification at the Universities abroad there is growing pressure to provide high quality foreign language (English in particular) teaching facilities. The effectiveness of communication mostly depends on a successful combination of

procedural skills that can only be developed via their usage. If language learning is dependent on language use, those learners who experience a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment would find it "an easier climb" than mastering various discourse roles upon which effective spontaneous communication is built. Though the students choose to participate in international educational projects and to feel independent when choosing learning strategies, many of them still tend to consider teachers 100% responsible for their progress while taking minimal care of their own learning planning. Thus, teaching them learners' autonomy principles in the conditions of intercultural integration seems to be at a high rate of importance to make learners put on responsibility for the decisions related to their learning foreign languages and the act of implementation of their decisions.

The term "learner autonomy" was first defined by Henri Holec in 1981 as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [5]. Since then many definitions have been coined to explain the phenomenon due to the context and the level of debate. Harden and Crosby [4] describe student-centered learning as focusing on the students' learning and 'what students do to achieve this, rather than what the teacher does'. This explanation highlights the 'doing' concept of the autonomous

student. Another aspect to take into account while interpreting "learner autonomy" is whether we see it as a means (foreign language learning) or as an end in itself (making students autonomous learners). The teacher's role in providing support and creating room for enhancing learner autonomy requires great patience, effort and skill.

How can we make student-centered learning work? With respect to a curriculum design, a student-centered concept means that a student has a choice what subject to study and which way to study. Nevertheless, we still need to understand to what extend the idea can be integrated into the structure of nowadays higher education.

Modular study has been introduced to provide for a system that lets students choose the modules they are going to study. It encourages them to highlight their own learning objectives, dependent on their current language competence. Another modern approach is Problem Based Learning, which via the issues helps students develop their own learning goals, filling in the gaps in their knowledge or understanding in that way.

There are other approaches to curriculum design which support the idea of student choice and autonomy in learning, for example, the systems-based approach,

resource-based learning, and experiential or personal relevance approach [9]. Writing of learning outcomes, focusing on what the student will be able to do, rather than on the content being covered by the teacher has become a popular practice in course design in many countries round the world [10]. This can be considered a serious step towards student-centered learning in the curriculum and helps to place the emphasis on the learner as opposed to a coverage model by the teacher. The University of Glasgow [11] identified four main strategies in a study on student-centered learning practices in their University. The first strategy aims to make the student more active in gaining knowledge and skills and suggests including exercises in class, fieldwork, using computer assisted learning (CAL) packages etc. The second strategy intends to enhance the students' awareness of what they are doing and why they are doing it. The third strategy focuses on interaction, e.g. the use of tutorials and other discussion groups. The final strategy is to shift the focus on transferable skills and looks beyond the immediate course requirements to other benefits for the student in later employment.

With numerous students enrolling in courses, the challenge seems to keep the standards when the funding decreases and the budget isn't enough to hire new teachers (the present complicated situation in Ukraine). A solution to this problem

nowadays is seen as developing blended learning courses that would combine online and in-class content and participation. This technology-based model makes the course compatible with students' needs and constraints, providing access to the resources at any time, making it possible to coordinate working schedules. As the number of face-to-face classes decrease, and fewer contact hours are involved, it is important to bring fundamental course knowledge acquisition out of the classroom and use classroom time for integrating and synthesizing the knowledge, allowing teachers to work with smaller groups. That entails moving a greater part of the teaching-learning transaction away from faculties and departments, so that students have more control of their own learning, which fosters student-centered learning.

In striving to reduce the amount of lecture classroom hours for more student-centered approach the lecturers may consider some ideas for both within and outside the lecture format. Group discussions, independent intercultural projects, debates, learning journals, computer assisted learning (CAL), choice in subjects for study, writing an article for a newspaper and developing portfolio can be applied for outside of the lecture format. At the lecture a teacher can organize short discussions in twos and continuing discussions in larger groups (buzz groups), cross-overs (mixing students into groups by letters or numbers), rounds (taking

turns to individual students to talk), quizzes, writing 3-4 min reflections on learning, role-play, poster presentations or student class presentations.

A blended learning environment incorporates a proportion of on-line e-learning, mobile learning and class time, which can be reserved for 'traditional' face-to-face style. The online part of the course can provide students with multimedia content whenever and wherever the student has Internet access. Another incentive can be proved by the statement that blended learning fosters collaborative style, keeping learners motivated to learn autonomously online through the use of software introduced during class time.

However, one question could arise as criticism to the concept: Will the lecturer (teacher) be needed when the learners are nearly autonomous? Selwyn [8] argues that teachers will keep the integral part in learning process. Without the teacher's input as a helpful 'resource' when something goes wrong, students are likely to get sidetracked with their learning aims. The teacher's role of a facilitator, as well as a coordinator, is still undeniable when it comes to setting goals and self-assessment when the learners are exposed to a list of questions (adapted from the Self-Assessment Questionnaire [2]:

- what material they have studied or practiced;

- what was the aim of their lesson;

- how well they can deal now with the material they have learned or revised;

- to what extent they find this material relevant to their needs;

- to what extent on reflection they have achieved the aim of the lesson;

- what are their weaknesses;

- in which way they need to change their learning approach;

- what they would like to see their following lesson focused on.

This element of a coaching system puts the learners in control of their learning attitudes and habits as well as promotes autonomous learning practices. It will also encourage them to keep on a track to their main aim of learning English, thus, to stay goal-oriented. The teacher's paramount role is to facilitate the students' personal involvement into self-assessment practice.

Throughout the period of its development the concept of a blended course design was enriched with various models. Neumeier [7] states that it is important to give sufficient insight to course design when trying to implement elements of blended learning into a foreign language programme. Joint Research Centre of European Commission and Institute for Prospective Technological Studies held the research "School's Over: Learning Spaces in Europe in 2020: An Imagining

Exercise on the Future of Learning" that brought about the idea of a three-level structure of an educational programme that functions on a micro, meso and macro levels [1].

The micro level introduces the decisions made related to task design in the classroom where tasks are the building blocks for lessons, especially in the context of language learning. Tasks will be accomplished at this level with the help of educational online resources such as Google+ communities, Blogs, podcasts, wikis, Power Point tools or any other form of online teaching tool. It is the teacher's job to provide their learners with the ICT (Information Communication Technologies) know-how and show how each individual tool could assist their learning experience.

The meso level of course designs aims at considering institutional goals. Every educational establishment has a list of goals for each class group. The things that may be kept into consideration are the overall institutional policies and graduate requirements, departmental guidelines, institution's curriculum, class syllabus, fulfillment of "can-do" objectives, completion of class requirements, the time allowance of actual teacher time per week and the learner's expectation that the institution may have for each individual student.

The main objective of <u>the macro level</u> course design is to monitor the effects that a blended learning may have on the community in general which can include a different mode of learning that can trigger a chain reaction altering the way people learn.

Many questions are often asked about the effectiveness of autonomy in learning. Phil Benson highlights the point that "if we define the autonomy as the capacity to stay in control of one's own learning, this is rather like asking whether a driver who demonstrate the capacity to control a vehicle is an effective driver or not" [3]. Thus, controlling one's own learning can be considered an essential part of effective learning. The question is whether we can find effective ways to foster autonomy. In this sense the effectiveness of autonomous learning can be measured by the reward we get for the energy we expend not only in terms of autonomy, but also in terms of the ability to learn languages.

David Little [6] highlights two general arguments in favour of trying to make learners autonomous. First, if learners are reflective with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient, since it is more focused and personal than otherwise. In particular, what is learned is more likely to serve learners' wider needs. Second, if they are proactive to their learning, the problem of motivation is solved.

Autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome occasional motivation setbacks, although they may not always feel absolutely positive about all aspects in their learning. It is the author's intention to prove that the use of a blended learning curriculum can positively influence students in becoming more autonomous and improving their foreign language abilities. The learners' willingness to further integration of ICT into language learning is convincing the evidence to support the idea that learner autonomy is a psychological phenomenon, thus, it seems probable that within the next few years more of the research relevant to learner autonomy and blended learning will be prompted by the desire to explore its impact on learners, teachers and educational systems.

REFERENCES

1. *Теорія та практика змішаного навчання*: монографія / В. М. Кухаренко [та ін.]; ред. В. М. Кухаренко; Харківський політехнічний ін-т, нац. техн. ун-т. – Харків: КП "Міськдрук", 2016 – 284 с.

2. Baleghizadeh, S., Masoun, A. *The Effect of Self-Assessment on EFL Learners' Self-Efficacy* (2013) TESL CANADA JOURNAL, 31(1), 42-58.

3. Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning: Applied Linguistics in Action*. Routledge, 296 p.

4. Harden, R. M. and J. Crosby (2000). AMEE Guide No 20: *The good teacher is more than a lecturer - the twelve roles of the teacher*. Medical Teacher 22(4), 334-347.

5. Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Oxford: Pergamon Press (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe).

6. Little, D. (2000). *Learner autonomy and human interdependence: some theoretical and practical consequences of a social-interactive view of cognition, learning and language*. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds), *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*, 15-23. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.

7. Neumeier, P. (2005). *A closer look at blended learning-parameters for designing a blended learning environment for language teaching and learning*. ReCALL, 14(1).

8. Selwyn, N. (2011). *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*. Published by Continuum, 1st edition.

9. Toohey, S. (2000). *Designing Courses for Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

10. UCD Centre for Teaching and Learning (2005). *Course Design*. Retrieved from http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/good/cou3.htm.

11. University of Glasgow (2004). *Student Centered Learning*. Retrieved from http://www.gla.ac.uk/Otherdepts/TLS/Project/Reports