

TILTM 2022**Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication****DEVELOPING ESSENTIAL SKILLS TO BUILD LEARNER
AUTONOMY OF STUDENTS AMID PANDEMIC**

Oxana E. Chernova (a), Aleksandr V. Litvinov (b)*

*Corresponding author

(a) RUDN University, Moscow, Russia, oxana-c@mail.ru

(b) RUDN University, Moscow, Russia; MSUPE, Moscow, Russia, alisal01@yandex.ru

Abstract

The present research paper investigates the essential qualities and skills for building learner autonomy of university students amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors define learner autonomy and single out its components (motivational, personal and competence-based); in addition they describe the four levels of each component, and break the identified qualities and skills into four groups: general, special, intellectual, and psychological-characterological. The article also sets up the links between learner autonomy components and the necessary qualities and skills to develop learner autonomy in students. The authors conducted an experiment for two spring semesters (2019-2020, 2020-2021 academic years, 120 subjects), and worked out both the factors to keep students motivated and help them develop learner autonomy in the absence of face-to-face communication in class and those which intensify student frustration, dissatisfaction and inefficiency while learning online. Also, the authors provide an analysis into the qualities and skills that have been developed more successfully, and try to find good grounds for the reasons.

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1. Introduction

The present study has become a vital issue since the pandemic has triggered the use of online learning at all levels of education, including Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs), all around the globe. Hence, both teachers and students found themselves in an unusual and novel environment, and had to face unfamiliar challenges, develop new skills, and adapt themselves to emergencies within the limited time framework.

In the fast-changing environment teachers had to deliver high education standards, be flexible, creative and pro-active, while students had to develop higher motivation and responsibility, increased scrupulousness and diligence, readiness to work independently and autonomously; in some situation be their own supervisors and tutors.

The Russian Federation during this Time of Changes has been no exception that is proved by a number of studies (Bolgova et al., 2021; Dozhdikov, 2020; Gafurov et al., 2020). IHLs across the country transferred their educational process onto Learning Management Systems (LMSs), extensively used e-learning and m-learning. According to the findings by Gafurov et al. (2020), IHL students were totally satisfied (41.2%), somewhat satisfied (43.4%), rather or totally unsatisfied (15.4%) with online learning.

Despite all the advantages of online learning, including a student-centered approach (Price, 2021), flexibility (Smedley, 2010), ease of communication (Wagner et al., 2008), cost-effectiveness (Amer, 2007), increased digital literacy, creativity, and thinking skills (Kuimova et al., 2018), improved teaching pedagogy (Bailey & Lee, 2020) and others, there are some disadvantages as well, such as absence of face-to-face communication (Young, 1997), lower ability to concentrate, occasional network instability deteriorating the learning process (Shim & Lee, 2020), possible unethical activities (i-cheating, plagiarism) (Akkoyuklu & Soylyu, 2006; Hameed et al., 2008).

To fully harness the potential of e-learning and improve students' satisfaction with the educational process, the authors consider it necessary to develop learner autonomy making it a priority for today's graduates. Hence, the primary objective of IHLs should be fostering a motivated and creative learner, ready to take full responsibility for his/her learning outcome, be an independent and autonomous personality.

In the current conditions, however, as far as the level of learner autonomy in Russia is concerned, there is a lot of room for improvement. With this context, one of the most urgent issues is to identify both qualities and skills necessary for building up learner autonomy and find out ways for their development.

Since foreign languages play a significant role in modern society, and recent years have seen a demand for translators of vocationally-oriented texts, nonlinguistic IHLs are involved in training of such specialists. Given that ESP students have less foreign language lessons in their curriculum compared to those of linguistic IHLs, developing learner autonomy is essential and obligatory (Chernova et al., 2020).

2. Problem statement

Western and Russian researchers have different definitions of *learner autonomy*. For some, *autonomy* is the learner ability (Holec, 1979; Koryakovtseva, 2001; Little, 1991; Mariani, 1997; Tambovkina, 2007); for others, *autonomy* is not an ability or a need, but a learner's responsibility

(Dickinson, 1987; Solovova, 2004); for still others, *autonomy* is willingness to manage one's own learning process (Khodyakov, 2013).

We agree with the scholars who consider learner autonomy an ability and by this ability we mean “an individually expressed peculiarity of a person that allows one to perform certain activities” and define *learner autonomy* as “an ability of an individual to consciously carry out his educational activities aimed at creating a personally significant educational product, self-reflex and adequately evaluate this product, accumulate positive experience, interact constructively and creatively with the educational environment and members of educational activities, taking responsibility for the process and product of this activity” (Chernova et al., 2019, p. 6). The authors have identified the following components in the structure of learner autonomy: motivational, personal and competence-based, with each component having four levels: A (creative) - high, B (productive) - above average, C (reproductive) - medium, D (factual) – low.

To develop learner autonomy, the authors have designed a methodology, comprising three stages: the *self-check* stage, the *cognitive-creative* stage, and the *evaluation stage* (Chernova et al., 2018). Besides, since for any activity, in our research autonomous learning, performers need a certain set of skills, we have identified the skills essential for would-be translators in VOLL and developed the criteria to evaluate them.

Scholars cannot agree on a single definition of skills. There are two basic concepts: skills as a process, individual actions learned by a person, performed consciously (Gal'perin, 1977; Lerner, 1983) and skills as readiness and ability to perform certain activities (Petrovsky, 1996). We agree with Gavrilina (2012) that skills are a mastery of a complex system of actions and operations that are subject to a conscious goal and used by a person in new conditions due to the positive transfer of acquired knowledge and skills.

We classified skills necessary for would-be translators in VOLL to develop their autonomy into the following groups: 1) general skills (goal-setting, planning, self-correction, self-control, an ability of self-forming transfer skills, use technical learning aids, reference and information search); 2) special skills (communicative skills by types of speech activity, characterizing the level of proficiency in a foreign language as a means of communication); 3) intellectual skills (an ability to compare, generalize, analyze and systematize information, argue, draw conclusions, establish cause-and-effect relationships, classify, draw analogies, logically comprehend the material, highlighting the main idea); 4) psychological-characterological skills (persistence, attention, good memory, high performance, perception, will, reflection, an ability to conduct self-monitoring and introspection, to give an adequate self-assessment of one's activities, to be aware of one's motives). General skills play a major role in the development of learner autonomy of would-be translators in VOLL. It should be noted that at different stages of the proposed methodology, the significance of various groups of skills is different. At the self-check stage, the leading ones are general and psychological-characterological skills; at the cognitive-creative stage, all groups of the skills are important; at the evaluation stage, the primary role is played by general, special and psychological-characterological skills (Chernova, 2018).

The identified components of learner autonomy are closely interconnected with the essential skills to develop learner autonomy. The motivational component includes such important indicators as the need for autonomous activity, the personal significance of autonomy and independence, and the formed

motives for carrying out such activities. The personal component is of great importance, since the development of abilities and personality traits included in this component will allow the translator to be engaged in self-education and improve his/her professionalism. In the competence-based criterion, the skills that contribute to the professional competence of a translator are evaluated.

According to the International Evaluation System, the authors have developed criteria to determine the mastery of learner autonomy components, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels of mastery of learner autonomy components

| Component | Levels |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Motivational | A (an adequate stable self-esteem of one's abilities, knowledge and skills; hardworking; punctual, responsible, assiduous; well-developed memory and attention; brilliant analytical skills) |
| | B (self-esteem of one's abilities, knowledge, and skills is quite adequate, but not always stable; in most cases hardworking, punctual, responsible; well-developed operational and long-term memory and attention; good analytical skills) |
| | C (self-esteem of one's abilities, knowledge, and skills is not adequate enough, and often not stable, floating; can be hardworking, punctual and responsible, but does not often show these qualities; occasional problems with remembering information and attention, cannot always concentrate on the subject for a certain time; mediocre analytical skills) |
| | D (self-esteem is inadequate (excessively overestimated or underestimated), unable to realistically assess one's abilities, knowledge, and skills; not enough diligence, punctuality and responsibility, not ready to be responsible for the results of one's work, inclined to blame other people or circumstances for failures; problems with storing information (working memory is not developed, problems with memory productivity (volume, speed, accuracy, duration, readiness)); problems with attention (both arbitrary and post-voluntary); poorly developed analytical skills) |
| Personal | A (fully formed motives for autonomous activity; a very high need to master the ways of autonomous work, high need to achieve personal results autonomously) |
| | B (well-formed motives for autonomous activity, high need for mastering the methods of autonomous activity, ready to improve autonomous skills) |
| | C (unstable motives for autonomous activity, weak need to master the methods of autonomous activity, weak personal interest in the formation of autonomous work skills) |
| | D (poorly formed motives for autonomous activity, no need for autonomous work, the personal importance of having autonomous skills is not realized) |
| Competence-based | A (successfully plans and organizes one's autonomous work: plans time, distributes tasks and sets priorities; the skills of searching, collecting and processing information are fully formed; the ability to set goals and find ways to solve self-educational problems is fully formed; possesses the skills to use ICT to achieve self-educational goals; possesses the skills of self-control, reflection and adjustment of one's autonomous activities) |
| | B (in most cases, knows how to independently plan and organize one's autonomous work: plan time, distribute tasks, set priorities; knows sufficiently enough how to search, collect and process information; possesses sufficiently formed skills to set goals and find ways to solve the tasks; possesses sufficient skills in the use of ICT; is able to carry out self-control, introspection and adjustment of one's autonomous work; reflects one's autonomous activity) |
| | C (is rarely engaged in planning, distribution of tasks and prioritization, cannot always organize one's work; poorly knows the methods of searching, collecting and processing information; can find ways to solve the stages of tasks; does not have sufficient skills in the use of ICT to achieve the set goals; shows elements of self-control and introspection, can partially correct one's autonomous activity; shows the first signs of reflection of one's autonomous activity) |
| | D (has a poor understanding of the organization of one's work, time planning, distribution of |

tasks and prioritization, tends to leave everything until the deadline; has poor notion of methods of searching, collecting and processing information; with the teacher's help can set goals and find ways to solve the tasks set according to the model; initial skills to use ICT; exercise self-control; very weak ability to reflect and correct one's autonomous activity)

3. Research questions

Taking into account the fact that at the time of pandemics students were completely or almost completely deprived of face-to-face communication with their professors, which made developing learner autonomy even more complicated compared to the time of blended and offline learning, the research questions are as follows:

- i. What kept students motivated and helped master their essential skills to further develop learner autonomy?
- ii. What factors prevented students from being fully involved and satisfied with online learning?
- iii. What skills and components of learner autonomy have been formed better than others and why?

4. Purpose of the study

This study focuses on investigating the factors which prevented students from harnessing full potential of ICT and getting satisfaction from the online learning, the factors which, on the contrary, stimulated their interest and helped develop learner autonomy. And also it was necessary to find out which components of learner autonomy were developed better than others and analyze the underlying reasons.

5. Research methods

The research was conducted during the spring semesters 2019-2020, 2020-2021 academic years with 120 second-year students (75 (62.5%) were female, and 45 (37.5%) were male) from Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Academy of Engineering (Departments of Mechanics and Mechatronics, Innovative Management in Industries, Civil Engineering, Architecture, Machine Building, Transport, Oil and Gas Engineering). The researchers used the following methods: questionnaires, surveys, tests, methodologies by Kozlov et al. (2002), Mil'man (1990), Rokeach (2009), Rogov (1999). The questionnaires consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions and entry, mid-of-the-term, and final tests were used as data collection tools. The tests were devised with various MOODLE plug-ins to check preliminary knowledge, trace the progress of mastering the material in the middle and at the end of the term.

6. Findings

At the end of each term, after analyzing the questionnaires and the results of the tests, with regard to the first research question, the authors found out the following: participants noted that online learning

focuses on their individual needs (65%), is flexible in terms of time and place (37.5%), eases communication (40.8%), allows self-pacing (70%), leads to increased learning satisfaction (32.5%) and language proficiency (75%) and decreased level of stress (16.7%); students have more time to speculate over the answers (53.3%) to make fewer mistakes and feel more confident; they became become more independent and autonomous (17.5%), mastered new ICTs (11.7%), no less important are time and commuting expenses savings (83.3%) and absence of geographic boundaries (75.8%).

As far as the second research question is concerned, the students pointed out lack of familiarity with some ICTs (8.3%) and some time required to get used to them (4.2%), a complete absence of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students as well as students themselves (91.7%), decline in the ability to concentrate (22.5%). Online learning requires strong motivation and time management skills (50%). Moreover, network instability can disrupt learning efficiency (72.5%); it is not suitable for all fields (12.5%). Students can be distracted by other sites (17.5%) or become addicted to their gadgets (18.3%). Those who stayed at home during the pandemic sometimes found it difficult to concentrate at the lesson among their family members (21.7%). Since Russia is a vast country, some had problems with time zones (4.2%). While others staying at dormitories had to study in co-working areas with better internet connection, but were disturbed by background noise (15.8%).

The analysis of the third research question has indicated that general and special skills have been formed better than others and among the three components of learner autonomy competence-based component was the leading one. It can be explained by the following factors: since general skills are universal, metadisciplinary, students had more opportunities for their development, for all their subjects were online. As it has been noted above, highly developed general skills are a must in building up learner autonomy of would-be translators in VOLL. As far as special skills are concerned, they are the core skills for would-be translators in their professional activity. Since students had more time at their disposal, they could have more practice: watching films in foreign languages, using multimedia, fulfilling tasks on MOODLE limitless number of times to master the material, etc.

7. Conclusion

The present research has studied several factors that can help develop learner autonomy among IHL students at the time of pandemics, when both students and teachers were deprived of face-to-face communication and had to adapt to the novel and unfamiliar environment. Teachers had to master new ICTs, learn to fix problems, transfer their material online and at the same time adhere to the highest possible standards and keep students motivated and involved in the learning process. Students, who since early childhood were used to guidance and constant support of their educators, had to accept the challenge, acquire new skills to manage time, find motivation, take responsibility for their results, be their own coordinators, that is to become independent and autonomous learners.

Besides, the authors identified the qualities and skills to build up learner autonomy and proposed their classification. In addition, they developed a methodology to build up learner autonomy at the time of pandemics. According to the results of the experiment, conducted during two semesters, general and special skills, being the key for the training of a professional translator in VOLL, have been successfully developed even in conditions of a lack of face-to-face communication and scaffolding and constant

guidance of the teachers, which proves that the methodology developed by the authors for the building up learner autonomy is effective and efficient.

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