

## Fostering Autonomy in ESP

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**Abstract:** *Autonomous Learning is one of the major approaches in teaching ESP. Teaching Maritime English, being an example of ESP, is challenging for the students since it requires achieving a high level of communicative competence in a multicultural professional environment.*

*University students work in mix-ability groups and their level is usually lower than the one necessary for expanding language skills. Therefore autonomous learning is a skill which ESP lecturers should develop in spite of the above mentioned restrictions and throughout the course of education.*

*The paper presents the authors' work on a Portfolio of Maritime English Teaching Materials for the Speciality of Marine Engineering designed for students' individual study as an important step towards acquiring autonomous learning skills.*

**Key words:** *approaches, autonomous learning, communicative competence, ESP, in-house projects, Maritime English, teaching materials*

### INTRODUCTION

Communicative teaching, learner-centeredness and autonomy share a focus on the learner as the key agent in the learning process and the idea of autonomy currently appears to be in line with the need for skilled language learners within a global economy. Marine Engineering students from the Technical University of Varna are an example of a target group subject to such instruction since in the future they are going to be involved in multicultural professional communication. To this end they are expected to become life-long autonomous learners.

The paper presents the authors' work on a **Portfolio of Maritime English Teaching Materials** for the Speciality of Marine Engineering designed for students' individual study as an important step towards acquiring autonomous learning skills. University students work in mix-ability groups and their level is usually lower than the one necessary for expanding language skills. Therefore autonomous learning is a skill which ESP lecturers should develop in spite of the above mentioned restrictions and throughout the course of education. For this reason the various theoretical and practical aspects of autonomy and autonomous language learning have been in the focus of designing the PORTFOLIO.

### MAIN BODY

'**Autonomy**' is a problematic term because it is loosely used along with '**autonomous learning**'. Benson makes a distinction between three aspects of autonomy: "... autonomy as an attribute of the learner, autonomous learning as a mode of learning, and educational practices designed to foster autonomy" [3]. Self-instruction, self-access learning, self-directed learning and independent learning are other terms used in discussions on the issues of autonomy. This notion is difficult to be defined precisely and the literature in the field has debated its various aspects: whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behaviour; whether it is characterised by learner responsibility or learner control; ... and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on complementary teacher autonomy [3].

Taking into consideration the development of the notion, we have accepted Holec's definition of autonomy as "the capacity to take control over one's learning". He underlines that 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" ([4] as cited in [5]).

Autonomous Learning is one of the major approaches in teaching ELT and ESP and is taken for granted to be beneficial to learning. The ideal autonomous learners are considered to have insights into their language styles and strategies, to take an active approach to the learning task at hand, to be willing to take risks, to be good guessers, to

attend to form as well as to content and to have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language [9].

Learner autonomy is achieved by first training the learner in terms of strategy development and learning skills. Various conditions are necessary to achieve autonomous learning. All language learning **strategies** are related to the features of motivation, control, goal-directedness, autonomy and self-efficacy. Cognitive, mnemonic, metacognitive, affective and social strategies help learners become more autonomous. Individual learners differ in study habits, motivation and interests and develop differing degrees of independence throughout their educational career [11]. Some learners are better capable than others in developing autonomy, even independently of the efforts of language instructors. For this reason the effectiveness of attempts and efforts to foster autonomy should be considered separately from the effectiveness of autonomous learning itself.

Autonomy may take various forms since there are various aspects of taking control over one's learning. Therefore no single approach is implied in fostering autonomy but different practices and means can encourage and promote it in education. In our concept of the PORTFOLIO we have incorporated **resource-based approaches** emphasizing independent interaction with learning materials; **learner-based approaches** emphasizing the behavioural and psychological changes in the learner; **teacher-based approaches** emphasizing the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners and **curriculum-based approaches** extending the idea of learner responsibility for achieving curriculum goals [3].

**Technology-based approaches** emphasizing independent interaction with educational technologies are still ahead to be applied taking into consideration the current academic context at the TU-Varna. **Classroom-based approaches** emphasizing learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning have not been implemented in the PORTFOLIO although they are another aspect of this well-known classification in the literature.

Learner autonomy is deeply-rooted in the Western educational systems whereas it is still new and unnatural for Bulgaria where educational traditions cause resistance to independent learning. Such is the case with the ESP students at the TU-Varna who are used to "rote learning" and "spoon-feeding" from secondary schooling. The limited teaching hours at the university are not enough to change their learning habits and styles and turn them into totally involved, active and autonomous learners [2], [6].

Drawing on Nunan's classification [8] of the 5 levels of autonomy implementation of learner action (**awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence**), the level of EAP/ESP students' autonomy at the TU-Varna towards the end of their studies is somewhere between the first two stages, i.e. awareness and involvement. Learners are able to identify strategy implications of tasks, identify their own preferred learning styles and make choices among a range of options. The latter model presupposes that autonomy develops alongside proficiency and if self-access learning is incorporated into the curriculum, students may reach the next two levels, namely intervention and creation. At this point they are expected to have developed their ability to modify and adapt tasks and even create their own ones.

For Marine Engineering students the path to autonomy starts with the acquisition of study competence. Both language and subject-specific competences make students actively involved in the learning process, self-aware critical thinkers, willing to experiment with new teaching materials about their speciality in English, able to self-evaluate their performance, thus achieving active learning, risk-taking and reflecting on learning. Marine Engineering students are offered the chance to select themselves relevant authentic specialized texts for the purposes of end-of-term examination on home reading and translation.

In the PORTFOLIO the project team has decided to focus on the above issues and extend the common classroom approaches and individual work practices. It follows the

free-standing nature of the materials and is divided into **two packs** – a **Student's Pack** and a **Teacher's Pack**. The former contains **sets of authentic reading texts** accompanied by various types of reading comprehension and text analysis **activities**. The students, in their capacity of autonomous learners, are given the freedom to decide which activities to do without following their succession and according to the immediate learning situation. Feedback is provided for every activity in the form of an **answer key** and **commentary**. An **evaluation card** is attached to each set of materials both in the Student's and the Teacher's Pack allowing learners to self-assess their performance and gain a sense of achievement and providing teachers with relevant feedback from the students in order to revise the suggested materials and tasks.

The evaluation cards for the students are designed to measure their degree of autonomy. In order to check how autonomous our learners have become we identify behaviours associated with control and judge the extent to which learners display them. Context, affect, cognition and intention are the domains we have considered when designing the card ([7] as cited in [3]). The questions students are asked stimulate them to reflect upon the following 'objects', to use Lor's term: learning events or situations, the learner's role in the learning process, learner's feelings about learning, learning gains, difficulties encountered in the process of learning and decisions and plans. The evaluation cards for the lecturers will allow them to reflect on the classroom experiences, their role in the teaching and learning process, drawbacks in the course of teaching and decisions for further adapting of the self-access materials and plans for improving and optimizing the teaching in the classroom.

Since 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century of technologies and communications, the texts in the PORTFOLIO are **up-to-date authentic texts** taken from specialized professional journals and present the newest developments in the field of Marine Engineering. Thus they have a dual role: to keep students interested in the future achievements they will witness and experience as specialists and to complement the core topics in the ESP textbooks. The texts are mainly 'experiential', to use Tomlinson's terminology, as they accentuate on content and not on language itself, i.e. they demonstrate how the language of speciality is used for communicating new knowledge and information [10]. The exercises vary from set to set according to the nature of the specialized text and its linguistic features. Yet the basic task types are **text-based** and **message-based**. The former include **reading comprehension** (e.g. open-ended questions, True/False statements, information transfer, etc.) and **vocabulary check** (e.g. word-building, gap-filling, matching definitions, giving synonyms and antonyms, identifying linking and reference words). The latter emphasize on giving ideas for follow-up and follow-on speaking and project work activities which the textbooks available lack.

In addition to the contents of the first pack listed above, the **Teacher's Pack** contains **suggested guidelines** for designing lesson plans for each set according to the teaching styles and methods of each individual lecturer. They are designed to facilitate the day-to-day work of fellow-colleagues, especially those who are new to the field of ESP and English for Marine Engineering. The **evaluation card** is of a different type focusing on the activity effectiveness and providing the opportunity for sharing their new ideas of exploiting the text and fostering teacher development. The **Teacher's Pack** is aimed at ensuring lecturer's autonomy to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous. The PORTFOLIO provides the teacher with the opportunity to combine learner autonomy and evaluation techniques by requiring from the students to keep a written record of their learning (plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary and whatever texts they themselves produce), and by engaging them in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class.

The PORTFOLIO project is an example of a small-scale intra-university project on Maritime English materials design that serves to introduce developments in the process of teaching ESP at TU-Varna and to advance lecturers' professional knowledge and skills.

Teacher-generated in-house flexible and self-access materials provide explanations, practice and reference. They could be used as both linear course materials and banks of resources open to evaluation, supplement and creative ideas. Along with the production phase resulting in additional highly specialised tailor-made teaching-and-learning materials, project work involves ESP teachers in a long-term process of reading up-to-date ELT methodology literature, conducting scientific research, adopting team work, sharing experience and exchanging ideas.

In the short-term, the expected advantages of the PORTFOLIO are the following:

- ❖ Dynamic and renewable data base containing teaching materials designed according to the specifics of ELT/ESP at TU-Varna;
- ❖ Creating suitable conditions and friendly environment for developing Maritime English lecturers' professional skills and ensuring their interchangeability;
- ❖ Stimulating students' skills for autonomous learning and studies with self-access materials;
- ❖ Authentic up-to-date texts on specialized topics offering new content;
- ❖ Variety of exercises complementing the traditional textbook types of exercises;
- ❖ Communicative exercises taking into consideration learners' level and needs aimed at activating their speaking and listening skills;
- ❖ Modern layout of the in-house self-access teaching materials allowing their usage both as a continuous whole, following the syllabus, and as free-standing additional materials according to students' level.

In the long-term this project may establish close collaboration between teachers and students and turn into an "open-source" data base to which all participants may contribute their own ideas and materials. Moreover, language teachers will be given the opportunity to become highly professional and creative ESP practitioners successfully meeting students' needs, academic requirements and international Maritime English standards through materials design.

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the ever-expanding literature, learner autonomy still remains a minority pursuit in the Bulgarian educational system, with university students lacking the experience of being exposed to learner-centered approaches and the peculiarities of ESP in secondary schooling. Since ESP students need language awareness, reflective skills and confidence for self-directed exploitation of texts they should be trained to be more autonomous in learning the content of their subject and its language. To this end autonomy should be an explicit aim and be integrated into the curriculum. A fuller understanding of the nature of autonomy in language learning, the practices that best foster it among learners and their relation to language acquisition is a further goal that language teachers and practitioners in the field can approach through analysis of day-to-day problems. The present project may be considered the first step towards adopting autonomous learning approaches at the TU-Varna by setting up in the future a Self-Access Centre of Maritime English. Thus students will be exposed to the full range of self-access materials, will be provided with opportunities for CALL and will be set in a real-life multicultural and professional language environment.

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**The paper is reviewed.**