

Learning to learn: first steps towards autonomy learning process

การฝึกศึกษาเพื่อเรียนรู้: ก้าวแรกของกระบวนการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพาตนเองของผู้เรียน

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Abstract

Often seen as a prerequisite to university education, students' autonomy is a competence which should be developed throughout the learning process. This paper will first review the concept of autonomy and autonomy learning in order to take a fresh look at educational methods and the different roles of social agents inherent to the teaching/learning process. Then this article will look into the potential of the action-oriented approach within that new didactic configuration. Finally, the importance of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) will be highlighted as an operational tool supporting the autonomy learning process.

Keywords: autonomy learning, action-oriented approach, ELP.

บทคัดย่อ

เป็นที่ทราบกันอยู่บ่อยครั้งในเรื่องความสำคัญเบื้องต้นของการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาที่ว่า กระบวนการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพาตนเองของนักศึกษานับเป็นวุฒิภาวะที่ควรได้รับการพัฒนาในทุกขณะของการเรียน บทความนี้จึงมุ่งที่จะทบทวนกระบวนการทัศนในการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพาตนเองและการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง เพื่อให้เกิดการตื่นตัวต่อวิธีการด้านการศึกษาและบทบาทของนักศึกษา อาจารย์และสถาบันการศึกษา ศักยภาพของวิธีการสอนแบบเน้นภาคปฏิบัติซึ่งเป็นการจัดการเรียนการสอนแบบใหม่ โดยยึดแนว European Language Portfolio (ELP) อันจะเป็นเครื่องมือเชิงปฏิบัติการที่จะช่วยสนับสนุนกระบวนการเรียนแบบพึ่งพาตนเองได้

คำสำคัญ: การเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพาตนเอง, วิธีการสอนแบบเน้นภาคปฏิบัติ, ELP.

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Introduction

During his/her professional and personal life, the individual learner develops linguistic, sociocultural and pragmatic competences within a diversity of contexts and environments. In 2001, the Council of Europe published the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth CEFR or the Framework) with the aim to offer “*a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses [...] thus promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages*” (Council of Europe, 2001: 1). The Framework quickly became the benchmark document in language teaching/learning even beyond the member states of the Council of Europe.

The individual, as social agent and language user, should be trained in autonomy learning when studying a foreign language, at the same time as he or she acquires declarative knowledge, know-how and existential competence. Indeed, international mobility and ongoing training lead people to diversify their language skills and to be responsible for their own learning. The CEFR actually defines ability to learn as one of the main objectives of language teaching/learning.

The lack of autonomy among learners is the result of linguistic insecurity within a meaningless learning process, but also of the degree of autonomy valorisation according to teaching/learning cultures. Therefore, it is important to determine the objectives of a learning sequence aiming at motivating and guiding learners. In this view, information should be transparent. The

identification of needs, the definition of objectives and the assessment procedure should be coherent. Both of these are essential elements in order to build meaningful learning.

How do learners become aware of the necessity to be involved and take responsibility for their own learning? How do we highlight language acquisition so as to encourage motivation and initiative? How do we first step on the path towards autonomy?

Ability to learn

The concern for autonomy and autonomy learning process is a leitmotif in language and culture didactics. Numerous authors think that “*teaching is an attempt at organised mediation between a learning item and the learner [...] which can be named as guidance*” (Cuq & Gruca, 2005: 123). The purpose of training is to offer learners the tools necessary to their autonomy learning in order to minimize progressively the role of the teacher in the learning process.

The CEFR defines ability to learn as one of the four general individual competences of the learner, along with declarative knowledge, skills and know-how and ‘existential’ competence. Therefore, the role of the teacher, among others, is to develop social agents’ individual learning capacities. “*In its most general sense, savoir-apprendre is the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary*” (Council of Europe, 2001: 106). More specifically, we can initiate or support



learning ability, which could include aptitudes such as “awareness of one’s own strengths and weaknesses”, “ability to identify one’s own needs”, or “ability to make effective use of the learning opportunities” (Council of Europe. 2001: 107-108).

According to J.-P. Cuq, “learning to learn is to engage into a learning process so as to acquire declarative knowledge and know-how which are constituent parts of learning abilities, in other words, the capacity to prepare and take decisions regarding the definition, the contents, the assessment and the management of a learning program” (2003: 21-22). Reaching those objectives would curtail the mediation role of the teacher and would make the social agent autonomous. That self-learning process by an autonomous agent should be differentiated from an institution-based autonomy learning. “Self-learning constitutes an alternative learning approach, which is different, additional and non-exclusive of standard teaching” i.e. hetero-managed teaching (Cuq. 2003: 30), leading to autonomy.

With regard to language and culture didactics, social agents’ autonomy represents a direction, an ambition, an ideal to reach. L. Porcher characterizes autonomy as “an objective which we target, something that we build, which we never entirely take possession of and which by definition, disappears just when we thought we had fully reached it” (quoted by André. 1989: 61).

The role of instructor-facilitator is to guide learners through this autonomy process which is built up step by step within a context

of dependence to the trainer. However, “learning is an activity, an action, which only students themselves can engage into” (Porcher. 2004: 58). A. Moyne explains that “one should not consider dependence and autonomy as two contradictory concepts or even exclusive but as two symmetrical states needed by human beings to become themselves” (quoted by André. 1989: 104). Therefore, the ambition of the trainer is to balance and dose learning between autonomy and dependence.

In conclusion, such clarification regarding the acceptance of autonomy learning will be illustrated with a quote from H. Holec: “autonomy is thus an expression describing a potential behaviour competence within a given situation, that is a learning context, but not the actual behaviour(s) of an individual in that situation” (quoted by André. 1989: 31-32).

Which orientations should we follow to stimulate autonomy learning in language class? According to M.-A. Hoffmans-Gosset, “with autonomy as educational aim a new form of pedagogical relation comes up” (quoted by André. 1989: 134). Autonomy is to be developed at the same time in relation to the teacher, to learners and to the knowledge. “The construction of new knowledge is experienced through a tension between destabilisation and support, the requirement to reorganize one’s knowledge and the possibility to refer to what has been already acquired” (Caudron. 2001: 34). Considered as a learning tool, group work seems to be an efficient option because it implies and builds autonomy. It encourages initiatives and responsibilities. It also allows learners to confront their speculations and engage them in their work evaluation.



Nevertheless it is essential that the teacher gives constraints and cues to create, encourage and facilitate group work.

The instructor might be in a position to offer a learning situation *“which destabilises sufficiently the learner in order to stimulate thinking. Because the knowledge assumed by the learner is facing what he has to see”* (Caudron. 2001: 33). The distance experienced by social agents from their own self-learning brings about awareness and responsibility, which in turn, contribute to the autonomy process. *“Learners may be expected to develop their study skills and heuristic skills and their acceptance of responsibility for their own learning”* (Council of Europe. 2001: 149).

Subsequently, we will talk about students' autonomy and autonomy learning within a framework of a relative autonomy in the learning dynamic of a foreign language. We will remember the two main orientations stated by H. Holec: *“the transparency of the learning/teaching process and the participation of learners to that process”* (André. 1989: 129). We will attempt to consider a pedagogical approach which is associated to a *“research initiation towards autonomy-based behaviour”*, according to D. Bailly's expression, a dynamic conception of the didactic material as well as an orientation towards taking responsibility coming from autonomy learning.

The action-oriented approach

The contemporary didactic trend focuses on questioning the action-oriented

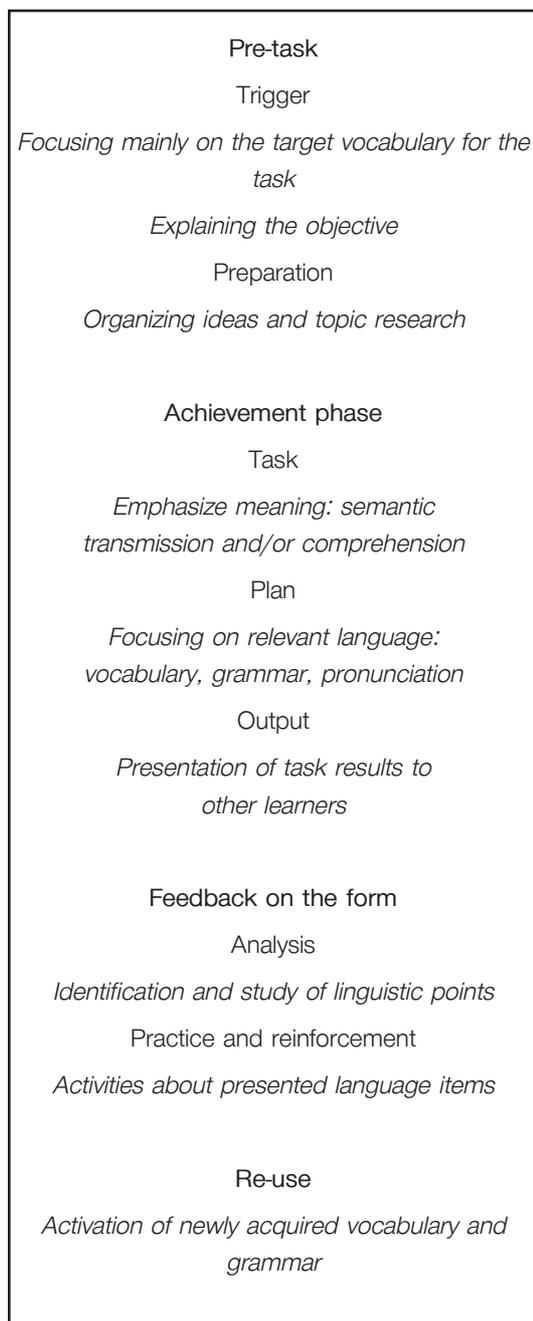
approach in language learning/teaching. The Council of Europe, despite its refusal to impose methodologies, clearly favours an action-oriented approach: *“the approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action”* (2001: 9).

With the action-oriented approach, class activities are closely linked to social activities that learners are led to accomplish in society. Social agents are seen as users and learners of a language. The issue is therefore to highlight the functional dimension of language. The user-learner is an individual who achieves tasks in context. According to the Framework, *“tasks are a feature of everyday life in a personal, public, educational or occupational domains”* (Council of Europe. 2001: 157). A task-based approach consequently allows to create class conditions very similar to the learners' daily environment. A task reveals that in a language class, activities are above all extra-linguistic and based on interaction. The action-oriented approach favours learning initiation through action, tasks achievement and the active involvement of learners.

To put into practice the action-oriented approach, D. Pluskwa, D. Willis and J. Willis give us a detailed analysis of two learning task-based sequences, from meaning towards form (2011: 205-231).



Document 1: a typical action-oriented approach framework



Source: summarised from D. Pluskwa, D., Willis & J. Willis. 2011: 217 and 225.

The group centred-approach and the importance given to co-constructed learning lead C. Puren to speak about a 'co-action-oriented' perspective. Another interpretation, backed by C. Bourguignon refers to a 'communic'action-oriented' approach in which learning is managed through the achievement of a task. Both these authors suggest possible debates and learning operational tools around a didactic and pedagogical approach which raises questions.

The action-oriented approach appears to be more like a paradigm of adequacy, which consists in selecting, articulating and combining various resources for the conception of a new didactic configuration, than as a methodology just like direct, Structuro-Global Audio-Visual (SGAV) and communicative methodologies, among others.

C. Puren analysis on the evolution of French as a Foreign Language didactics sheds light on the action-oriented fervour. According to him, "CEFR authors put forward on the one hand the idea of proceeding, on the other hand the distinction between use and learning. However, they do not offer as it would have been in fact necessary a concept for proceeding with use (action) and another for proceeding with learning (task)" (2006: 38). He describes the construction of proceeding with learning as an embedding system similar to Russian dolls. C. Puren states that in language and culture didactics each methodology was structured around the notion of proceeding with use, which is itself decisive in the preparation of proceeding with learning, because both are always related to



each other and show strong similarities. In this way, “*all methodologies have used their own action-oriented approach*” (Puren. 2006: 39). Learning objectives are therefore the reflection of social objectives and progress with those. The proceedings with use of reference comprise presently ‘living with the other’ and ‘doing with the other’, favouring social action, defined by C. Puren as a “*collective action with a collective purpose*” (2006: 38), thus the co-construction of declarative knowledge and the co-realization of tasks.

Teachers and institutions will seek to adopt such approach within an action-oriented perspective through which the user-learner of a language achieves meaningful tasks in context. Henceforth, the group of social agents in class can take part in the modelling of learning and language assessment, thanks to autonomy learning-based teaching.

The European Language Portfolio

Language instructors have access to numerous tools aimed at developing learners’ autonomy. The ELP, which has been made available to the public by the Council of Europe in 2001, represents a concrete application of the CEFR, aiming at the promotion of multilingualism and training throughout life, with a range of models complying with certain characteristics. In terms of educational support, the Portfolio offers a roadmap for autonomy learning.

Table 2: What is the European Language Portfolio?

A language passport	Here the language learner can summarise his/her linguistic and cultural identity, language qualifications, experience of using different languages and contacts with different cultures.
A language biography	The biography helps the learner to set learning targets, to record and reflect on language learning and on intercultural experiences and regularly assess progress.
A dossier	In this part of the ELP the learner can keep samples of his/her work in the language(s) he/she has learnt or is learning.

Source: Council of Europe portal for the European Language Portfolio.

The ELP offers a customised and intelligible learning tool, by that we mean transparent and multilingual, in which the social agents define their linguistic and cultural identity, self-assess skills thanks to the CEFR descriptors and keep personal work as a learning benchmark. “*They can assess their multilingual and multicultural identity, whether it is the result of school education or acquired outside school and become aware that any skill, even a minor one, deserves to be highlighted*” (Noël-Jothy & Sampsonis. 2006: 22). Furthermore, self-assessment criteria are stated in a positive and transparent way. ELP then becomes an important motivation factor for learners.



Concerns for recognition and highlighting experiences of using and discovering language and culture are inspired by the professional environment. With the ELP, one sees the design of an attempt to match language training with job market. As a matter of fact, social agents can list all their language competences, including partial skills or life experiences which traditional assessment procedures hardly take into account. *“It follows, therefore, that the recognition and assessment of knowledge and skills should be such as to take account of the circumstances and experiences through which these competences and skills are developed. [...] It is designed to include not only any officially awarded recognition obtained in the course of learning a particular language but also a record of more informal experiences involving contacts with languages and other cultures”* (Council of Europe, 2001: 175). The ELP thus collects together information on linguistic and cultural competences of user-learners, which are readily available for use to businesses as well as educational institutions.

According to J-P Cuq and I. Gruca, *“the learner’s representation of his own foreign language level is part of self-assessment”* (2005: 217-218). The ELP is therefore an operational tool in the autonomy learning process, because it guides users towards awareness and taking responsibilities for their own learning. Those are fundamental clues for seeking autonomy. *“ELPs are mainly interesting because of their reflexive aim: they*

lead learners to take an active and thoughtful part in their education, their progress and to find out about the means to reach those objectives. They help them to be active agents (in terms of being fully involved) in their learning and assessment” (Noël-Jothy & Sampsonis, 2006: 25). While recording competences, keeping track of achievements and following progress, social agents are encouraged to take control of their own learning and to manage it. For C. Tagliante, *“this type of reflection is formative: one can truly speak about ‘participatory’ assessment, because it is not about putting down learners’ performance but more about informing them on what they can do and what they still need to learn in order to know-how”* (2005: 78).

“Therefore, self-assessment training is a full part of autonomy learning” (Cuq, 2003: 30). The ELP proves to be an essential tool for learners’ autonomy. Nevertheless the instructor has to engage and guide the learners with regard to its use so that they take full advantage of its learning potential and in order to follow up individual progress. T. L’Hotellier and E. Troisgros shed light on setting up further activities to the ELP, experimented in the target language according to two approach angles: muse on what is ‘efficient learning’ and learners’ choice of activities according to their taste while drawing their inspiration from the categories listed in the Portfolio; devise a grammar course by learners *“to be inserted in their ELP – making up their first autonomous initiative”* (2003: 13-18).



Conclusion

The purpose of language teaching/learning is the autonomy learning of social agents, a personal ability and an objective to reach. The instructor-facilitator helps to develop learning to learn by promoting group work, among others, as a learning tool which contributes to distance and to explicit learning process. The action-oriented approach allows user-learners to achieve tasks in a context similar to their daily environment. The ELP, as operational tool of the autonomy learning

process and of the recognition of multilingual and multicultural competences, even partial skills, helps social agents to find their way through their learning process.

Therefore, we see the shaping of new perspectives in French as a Foreign Language class, for social agents: learners, teachers, institutions, in particular with regard to the de-partitioning of developed competences and actions as well as the complexification of their roles in the teaching/learning process.

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