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WAYS TO GET STARTED IN TEACHING WRITING AUTONOMY

Bluashvili N.

У статті розглядаються питання розвитку навичок письмової мови в самостійній, автономній роботі студентів. Наводяться дані експериментального дослідження, проведеного автором у Телавському державному університеті, Грузія.

Ключові слова: навчання іноземної мови, письмова мова, автономність, експериментальне дослідження.

В статье рассматриваются вопросы развития навыков письменной речи при самостоятельной, автономной работе студентов. Приводятся данные экспериментального исследования, проведенного автором в Талавском государственном университете, Грузия.

Ключевые слова: письменная речь, автономность, экспериментальное исследование.

The article addresses the questions of writing skills development in students' independent, autonomous work. Results of the experimental research conducted by the author at Telavi State University are discussed in the article.

Key words: writing, autonomy, experimental research.

The main focus of the article will be on language didactics and in particular autonomy approaches in teaching writing. It will be argued that conditions of discursive dissonance rise above all when there is a conflict between 'official' or 'academic' approaches to learning and teaching, and local pedagogical traditions, which are often unacknowledged or out-of-consciousness. Learners and teachers alike are caught in a tug-of-war with one relatively explicit set of beliefs, instructions and values backed up by institutional authority. It is argued that the idea of language learner autonomy and of a new pedagogy for language learning that involves reassessment of the language learning-teaching relation is taking hold and expanding. We have a choice between the road which gives priority to individual personal autonomy and the road which gives priority to critical thinking and social learning.

Writing is a productive skill that is usually harder than reading, which is a receptive skill. If teachers do not stress grammar structures, but help students realize that writing is something you might say, only instead of oral presentation, it is in written form, we will have fewer problems with writing. Writing is a very important skill because it is a way to communicate clearly, with time to think. Often when we speak, we blurt out words that may hurt someone, or they may be poorly structured. In written communication, we have time to think, to look a word up in a dictionary, or to re-write something we don't like. Writing becomes less difficult for students when there is an example to learn by, a set format and when writing is closely connected to reading. Writing

includes many things: message, spelling, structure, grammar, punctuation, smoothness, vocabulary usage, word order, clarity, style, organization within a story, creativity. If students learn to write by spelling words, transcribing phonics lessons and making summaries of lessons, writing will come naturally to them. Daily journal writing is a great help in teaching students writing skills.

Unfortunately, many people have been "turned off" on writing because busy teachers made them copy long pages of notes, or copy questions to a text, instead of asking students to write correct answers to those questions. These are, frankly, time wasters. Writing includes ideas, style, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure...all of which have been previously mentioned. Equally important, however, is the penmanship, the formation of letters. Whether printed or in cursive isn't important. What IS important is that they be legible. Many writing activities can be tied into reading experiences. Students should use their skills and energy in writing (a mental exercise), not in sheer copying of texts or questions from a book. Note-taking is a good skill to develop, but the teacher needs to make sure that he/she explains to students what is important to note and what is superfluous material, perhaps interesting, but not necessary to know.

The term autonomy appears to be used in at least five ways:

- Situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- A set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;

- An inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- The exercise of student responsibility for their learning;
- The right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

In the past, the Grammar Translation Method was dominant in language teaching and learning. Under the influence of this method, teachers had a lot of responsibilities in language teaching. They had the main roles in classrooms and learners were obedient to their authority. They did whatever teachers asked them to do. Teachers were providers of knowledge and learners were recipients. Learners had passive roles, were completely dependent on their teachers in the process of language learning and lacked initiative. Lessons were product-oriented and teacher-centered. Learning was really boring in such classrooms. At the present time, with the language teaching being more and more communication oriented, the traditional classroom teaching is questioned and is being substituted by the learner-centered approach. The learner-centered approach in EFL has generated the concept of learner autonomy. One of the earliest supporters of autonomy in language teaching described it as the “ability to take care of one’s learning”. Although different scholars express dissimilar understanding of the expression, the common agreement on its importance appears to be extensively admitted. The common argument for justifying learner autonomy both in general education and language learning is that autonomous learners become highly motivated and the autonomy leads to better and more effective work. That is, an extremely motivated learner is more initiative and creative in learning; consequently, they will make the classroom instruction more useful. It is obvious that for learners writing is a means of recording, reformulating knowledge and developing ideas. Suitable written assignments can stimulate students and enhance active learning. Writing, especially the process approach, is, by nature, a self-critical one. It lends itself to the kind of introspection that would prompt students to reflect on their understanding, to communicate their feelings about what they know, what they do, what they struggle with, and how they experience learning. Teaching to write in EFL and other foreign languages coincides, not astonishingly, with those other skills.

The discussion of autonomous language-learning activities seems to focus mostly on providing self-access resources or counseling services. The concept of “activity for motivating autonomous learning” may be limiting, making it difficult for both researchers and practitioners to see possibilities.

Georgian students of English were exposed to teacher-centered and rote memorization oriented types of teaching. Even successful students were often considered to be with reactive autonomy. It is crucial for them to be exposed to a learner-centered approach and have a learner-centered experience with opportunities to express themselves in English, to communicate with others in English in a way that is both meaningful to them and not threatening/less anxiety-provoking. All EFL teachers have to explore their own autonomy as they experiment with introducing more autonomous learning strategies into their classrooms. There are a number of questions to be considered, such as: recipients in comparison with participants, what an autonomous teacher is, how such teachers operate, through what stages they go to become autonomous. In

addition to individualized writing, journal writing and self-assessment activities, the course participants are involved in various analytical and creative group tasks that encourage them to investigate the meaning of autonomy, as well as help raise their awareness of the significant link between autonomy and cooperative learning.

Notwithstanding broad discussions and ample theoretical research on English as a foreign language (EFL) education, to date there has been little research on student autonomy in the foreign language classroom in Georgia. The goal of this article is to explore Telavi State University students’ autonomy and autonomy in foreign language learning from the perspective of the Georgian students. Qualitative research methods were used in this study. The success of independent language learning at Telavi State University is attributable to the fact that students become increasingly more self-motivated in English learning, which leads to a noticeable improvement of their writing skills. Learner autonomy plays a central role in this achievement. While quality classroom learning is highly-valued at Telavi State University, classroom teaching hours have been reduced more than by half – with no change in student credit requirements for English courses – because students are able and willing to receive a large portion of their instruction in the self-access language laboratory, the library computer center, and dormitories where there is access to the Internet. The tendency to foster autonomy in language learning sets new challenges for language teachers. The learning process and role relationships of participants in traditional instruction differ significantly from the more learner-centered models.

Writing plays an important role in our personal and professional lives; thus, it has become one of the essential components at Telavi State University. In this article, we will concentrate on the communication, fluency and learning, since we consider writing as a tool for the creation of ideas and the consolidation of the linguistic system by using it for communicative objectives in an interactive way. Writing implies successful transmission of ideas from an addresser to an addressee via texts, and this exchange of information becomes a powerful means to motivate and sustain the development of language skills. The following activities were carried out during the experimental research on the autonomy of writing:

- Write words from the vocabulary that is given in the reading selection of the week. Ten words per week is a fair number for any age group because the difference is in the difficulty level of the words, not the number of words. Look for quality, not quantity. Have students put the words down in a special section of their notebooks.
- Use these words to write a story or a list of sentences every week. They can combine several words in a sentence, not necessarily write ten sentences for each of the 10 words.
- Give students a “writing aid” by showing a picture (cut from a magazine or a coloring book). Discuss the picture briefly; write on the board the words that children used to describe the picture. Ask students if any words from this week’s vocabulary to the reading text apply to the picture. When you have had a 5-minute discussion, ask students to write a story using (optionally) the words on the board.
- Students always ask teachers, “How long does my story have to be?” If the teacher sets word or page limits, students tend to write superficially, without depth or interest.

So get in the habit of telling students that word or page number is NOT as important as writing something interesting. So advise students to think up a plot (beginning, middle, end), then, and only then, to begin writing.

- Set a small kitchen timer (clock) for 15 or 20 minutes. Then tell students that they have to keep writing until the bell rings. Explain that even if the story isn't completed, it's OK. The goal is to write well. If students finish before the bell rings, they need to learn to review what they have written, edit it, rewrite words or clauses that are vague or with errors, so that they continue to work until the bell rings. Without the bell, students rush to hand in their work without revising it, and do less than their best. Using a timer gets better results.

- Teach students to proofread their work. Allow them to share papers with friends, so that they can exchange critical comments and share ways to make a story better. Students working in pairs can help each other, the goal being high quality work from everyone.

- Never give a task to write a story and collect it the same day for a grade. Mediocrity is supported in this way. Students get the idea, "Good! I finished that paper." Give a writing assignment on Monday and explain the requirements during the lesson. On Tuesday students write a story using the guidelines from the previous lesson. Collect it. After classes, using a highlighter mark mistakes: punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, misspellings, etc. On Wednesday in class, students correct themselves in the highlighted areas.

- Students in small groups decide on the order in which they will write, and then everyone writes one sentence to continue the story, a short story with a plot and an ending. When all students have had a chance to write their sentence, one of the team reads aloud their version to the entire class. One by one each team reads their final version. The objective is writing, but reading and listening are also parts of this activity, which shows students that with the same beginning, they can construct a great, unique story within each group. It helps students develop creative, expressive writing and vocabulary.

The research was carried out using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Georgian University students

became more autonomous during the 4-year long English writing course. Students developed autonomy in the following ways: used many websites designed for EFL students; exchanged email messages with EFL teachers whenever needed. The data were collected in four ways: a journal was kept on what they did to learn English in and out of class for four years; EFL teachers interviewed a couple of students; EFL teachers wrote observation reports weekly; the email messages were stored and analyzed. Students' English learning goals became more practical; they also used more English-learning methods in the final stages. There is often a gap between what learners look to be capable of doing from the autonomy theorists' views, and what students really do.

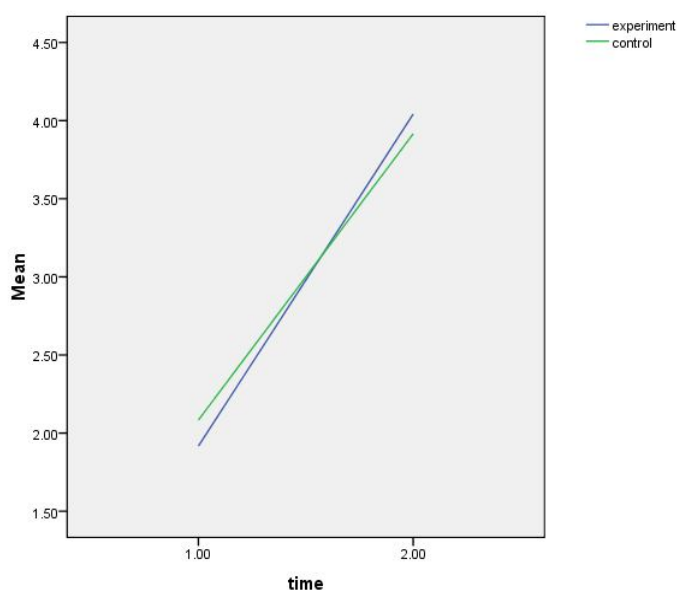
The purpose of the experiment was to test the hypothesis that was set forth at the beginning of the study. In particular, we wanted to find out, how great the role of autonomy in teaching writing skills was.

The research was carried out in stages:

First, a mini experiment (5 weeks) was conducted to find out difficulties students may encounter in the writing process, and also to determine the necessity of a long-term experiment.

Then the long-term experiment (one year) was carried out to verify the hypotheses.

The mini experiment was held at Telavi State University in October 2008. The duration of the experiment was five weeks. 24 first-year students from the faculty of humanities, English language specialty, took part in the experiment. They were divided into two groups: 12 students in the experimental and 12 in the control group. They were divided according to the test results, which included linguistic and cultural aspects. We formed as homogenous groups as possible according to age, gender, socio-economic and ethnic characteristics. The same teaching materials were used in both the groups. In the experimental group, as mentioned earlier, additional materials were used. The learning time was the same in both the groups. Both the groups had to write tests: a test before the experiment, in the middle of the experiment and the final one at the end. The mini experiment proved the advisability of further study.

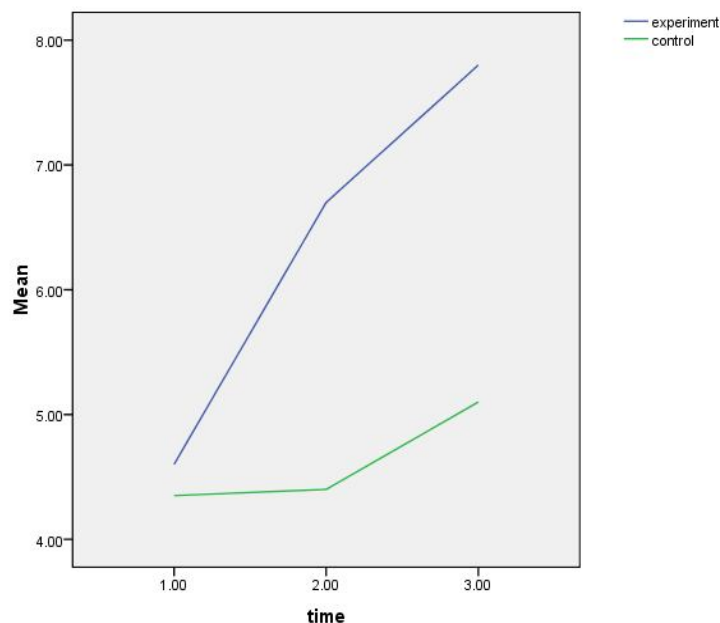


Graph 1. Comparison of the experimental and control groups

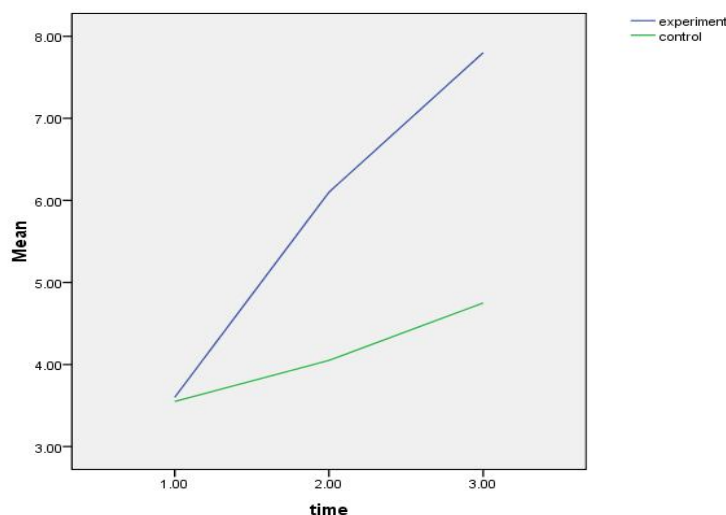
In addition, opinions and beliefs of students and teachers were investigated by means of a questionnaire. The survey results were used in the preliminary design phase of the long-term experiment; they helped establish the importance of various aspects and set a priority.

The long-term experiment was held at Telavi State University. 80 first-year students were divided into four homogenous groups according to their language proficiency level: two experimental and two control groups (20–20 students in each group). The groups were formed

on the basis of test results. The duration of the experiment was one academic year (2010–2011). Assessment tests were administered three times: before, in the middle of and after the experiment. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used for data processing. The same textbook was used in all the groups. Additional materials were taken from various sources according to student interests. The learning time was the same in both the groups. The results are presented in the following graphs:



Graph 2. Comparison of the first experimental and control groups



Graph 3. Comparison of the second experimental and control groups

As shown on the graphs, the level of writing skills is remarkably higher in the experimental groups. As for control groups, there is some growth, but much less than in the experimental group.

The test results of the first and second experimental groups show, that it is possible to significantly improve writing skills of students, if the foreign language teaching process is sufficiently autonomous. The results of experiment proved the hypotheses that autonomous

writing can be purposefully simplified for the students, if teaching English is enriched by introduction of the specific techniques. In teaching a foreign language we cannot ignore the teacher's attitudes towards students and ways s/he tries to reduce psychological stress. Moreover, professional development of teachers, acquisition of new skills and adoption of new technologies enable them to help students become autonomous learners.

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