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Надійшла до редколегії 14.07.10

УДК 811.111

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## SELF-CORRECTION SKILLS AS PART OF EFL STUDENTS' AUTONOMY

Розглянуто поняття автономії учнів при навчанні іноземним мовам та шляхи її створення. Особливу увагу приділено методиці самоконтролю як важливому засобу досягнення автономії. Запропоновано завдання для розвитку у учнів навичок самоконтролю.

*Ключові слова: навчання англійській мові як іноземній, автономія учнів, оцінювання, виправлення помилок, самоконтроль.*

Рассмотрено понятие автономии обучаемых при изучении иностранных языков и пути ее создания. Особое внимание уделено методике самоконтроля как важному средству достижения автономии. Предложены задания на развитие у обучаемых навыков самоконтроля.

*Ключевые слова: обучение английскому языку как иностранному, автономия обучаемых, оценивание, исправление ошибок, самоконтроль.*

The article deals with the notion of learner autonomy in a foreign language class and ways of achieving it. Special attention is given to self-correction methodology as a major means of promoting autonomy. Activities to develop students' self-correction skills and habits are suggested.

*Keywords: EFL teaching and learning, learner autonomy, evaluation, error correction, self-correction.*

In present-day methodology of teaching foreign languages the problem of learner autonomy arouses mixed feelings and lot of debates. While some educators hail it as a logical way forward, others regard it with deep suspicion, fearing it will put teachers out of job or cause unmanageable chaos in the classroom.

But, as Jon Taylor points out, learner autonomy «might best be described as a road along which teachers guide learners so that they can make the most of the journey» [7, p. 8]. He adds that there may not be the final destination at all, in the shape of complete autonomy, as most students will probably always remain teacher-reliant to some degree.

Given the current relevance of the problem, we may find a whole number of research works dedicated to different approaches to and aspects of learner autonomy. Its general issues as well as questions of self-correction in the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning have been addressed by such researchers as M.A. Antunes (2002), K. Jackson (2003), J. McDonough & C. Shaw (1983), E. Salter (2006), J. Taylor (2002). Let us make a brief overview of their theoretical theses and practical recommendations for foreign language (FL) teachers and learners.

All of the authors are unanimous about the increasing role of the learner in modern FL classroom. Implicit in many of their ideas is the point that the role of the teacher and

students may and must change over time. The traditional perceptions of teacher as expert, instigator and administrator, and student as passive recipient, are being remodeled, and sometimes profoundly shaken, to make way for other approaches. If the student is being persuaded to take on more responsibility for learning, then the teacher needs to facilitate this responsibility transfer, becoming a guide, counselor, resource manager and negotiator. The change need not be sudden or even complete: traditional roles may still be appropriate and desirable. Delicacy and sensitivity are essential, and resistance on both parts should be expected and tolerated. Learner autonomy should have nothing to do with teachers telling students what to think and how to learn.

There are different definitions of learner autonomy suggested by different authors. One of the most comprehensive ones has been given by J. Taylor, who defines it as «the readiness and ability to take charge of one's own learning» [7, p. 8]. In his view, this readiness involves skills and attitudes which are not necessarily automatic, and which, therefore, need developing. A certain degree of autonomy is always worth encouraging because it raises motivation and speeds up progress. It involves students reflecting on what makes an efficient learner and gives them the skills to become one, using the vast range of resources available to them as efficiently as possible.

The author suggests several steps aimed at promoting, analyzing and evaluating students' learning autonomy [7].

First of all, the teacher is supposed to raise self-awareness of his/her students. They can be encouraged to consider and discover the factors which are influential in language learning, while teachers can assess what their most effective role is. Needs analysis can be conducted so that the students wants and needs have a chance of shaping the syllabus. Teachers can expose learners to study skills and learning strategies, such as how to keep useful notes and how to deal with unknown vocabulary when it arises.

Activities in class can focus on the topic of learning as well as on any other subject. Students can reflect after class and evaluate activities and information, make comments, give opinions, complete forms or learner diaries, assess the extent to which their needs have been met and map out an action plan for future learning. The possibilities are extensive, but all along, the teacher needs to resist the temptation to do everything for them: students will never learn to use a dictionary if the teacher looks up all the words.

Suggested by the author are several practical activities, that can be done in class and steer students a few steps in the direction of their own self-help capability. One of them is so-called «needs analysis», meant to find out what students need or want before a course gets underway. This analysis is not supposed to be complicated and could be done in a form of a discussion or a checklist, such as the one below:

#### NEEDS ANALYSIS

##### **1 How often do you use English in your everyday life?**

- all day  once/twice a day   
 once a week  once a month   
 rarely  never

##### **2 In what media do you use English?**

- Reading:* newspapers  faxes   
 emails  letters  novels  other   
*Writing:* memos  faxes  emails   
 letters  articles  prose  other   
*Talking:* on the phone  socially   
 in meetings  giving presentations   
 other

*Attending:* conferences  dinners   
meetings  lectures  films  other

**3 What functions do you frequently need to perform in English?**  
socializing  negotiating  inviting   
greeting  presenting  agreeing   
enquiring  requesting  interrupting   
promoting  describing  explaining   
complaining  other

**4 Which do you feel you need to improve?**  
grammar  vocabulary  speaking/  
pronunciation  reading  listening   
writing  other

**5 Which activities do you find useful?**  
grammar exercises  drills  reading texts   
tests  games  songs  drama   
discussions  dictations  compositions   
listening to cassettes  other

Another activity is evaluating learners' progress. Reviews of what has been going on in class can keep students' attention on the direction to be followed in the future. They can be encouraged to express their opinions and feelings about activities and work done, progress made, and whether the problems are evaporating or clogging the system. This can be done by means of discussion, reflection, learner diaries or by completing a self-evaluation form. In this way students may be able to see more clearly what needs to be done in future.

STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION FORM

1 I give myself the following grades for the progress on this course. (Score 1–10)

Speaking

Listening

Reading

Writing

Grammar

Vocabulary

2 My notes are:  
well-organized  complete  clear  OK  messy  non-existent

3 I review my notes:  
regularly  sometimes  only before tests  never

4 I do my homework:  
always  often  sometimes  rarely  never

5 I speak English in class:  
as much as possible  a lot  often  little

6 I speak my own language in class:  
only when necessary  often  a lot  too much

7 My favorite class activities are:  
.....

8 I don't enjoy:

- .....
9. In my free time I practice English using:  
 videos  TV  radio  cinema  theater  novels  other books  maga-  
 zines  computers
- 10 The main difficulties I have with studying English are:  
 .....  
 .....

One of the main purposes of FL teaching is to make the oral and written output of the FL learners accurate and correct enough to correspond to the adopted standards and levels of the mastery of a foreign language. It has always been a major task of the teacher to free students of their speech of mistakes, at least those that hamper natural intercourse and create communication problems. Up to the present this task has been solved mainly through the correction of the students' speech output and feedback on the part of the teacher.

Today, when a transition is being made from the teacher-centered to the learner-centered language learning, a question arises about how to shift the emphasis from correction to self-correction and thus to increase the autonomy of the language learners.

All human activities create error. Natural speech often contains repetition, mistakes, hesitation, pauses and filler sounds and words. Language production which aims at greater accuracy and elegance requires care. For non-native speakers there is a special additional difficulty in attempting to express oneself in a foreign language. Often one feels more stupid and liable to make embarrassing mistakes: it is harder to think properly and be oneself.

In a FL class teachers have to pursue a dual goal – they aim both at production and correctness, though which of these two strategies they emphasize varies greatly. Natural speech is learned mainly by production, but most classroom teaching focuses on correctness. Without appropriate feedback some errors can become habitual, yet excessive intervention inhibits. What balance of encouragement and acceptance on the one hand and of critical scrutiny and correction on the other is desirable?

All around the world teachers spend time marking students' work. This should be very helpful and may be insisted on by the school or university administration as well as by the ministry of education authorities, but it is often inefficient in terms of resources and ineffective in terms of progress. Students may well have had enough of schooling already, and too many corrections merely discourage them from trying, from setting and achieving personal academic goals. Even motivated students will be frustrated if the marking seems merely to be for assessment or if they have not been taught good routines for learning from the teacher's corrections.

As stressed by Edwin Salter, «correctness may indeed be a pale virtue compared to vivid language and lively thought, but it is important and sometimes vital» [5, p. 28]. The author distinguishes two sources of error.

The first is language interaction (sometimes also called «language interference»), the particular relationship of the two languages, native and foreign, and difficulties can often be anticipated. Thus, for example, European inflections are generally a problem for Chinese speakers. The second source is individual, a combination of experience and personal factors which influences the quantity and type of error. The researcher terms these two factors the Language Interaction Error (LIE) and the Personal Ideosyncratic Error (PIE). Their combination gives the Profile of Error in Total:

$$LIE + PIE = PET$$

However, simply counting errors is of limited use and a few gross blunders are more serious than a large number of trivial mistakes which do not seriously affect communication. Native production itself contains errors – indeed, natural speech is characterized by what might be called formal irregularities, especially if examined without regard to the gestures and other interpersonal behavior which accompany it.

To sort out the problem of effective error correction, it is necessary to tackle it in wider terms of the learner autonomy and look at how this activity, especially guided self- and peer-correction, can form part of a learner's progress towards this autonomy, as well as come up with the techniques that can be used to facilitate it.

In her article «Parallel journey» [2] a British researcher Katherine Jackson considers some of the reasons why students and teachers might want to include self-correction of written work among their long-term goals. Firstly, self-correction fosters autonomous learning. It does this by helping students develop sensitivity to three areas: their own strengths and weaknesses, differences between their mother tongue and the target language, and the necessity for constant testing out and adjustment of their assumption about how the target language works in the face of new information.

A second reason lies in the nature of the medium itself and the current shift away from seeing writing simply as a *product* and towards teaching writing as a series of skills which make up *process*. Students need to know that teachers do not expect perfectly formed, grammatically correct sentences to flow from their pens and that, for all but the most informal writing, some degree of drafting, re-writing, revision is necessary, even when using one's mother tongue. This implies that there is a need of what Jane McDonough and Carol Shaw refer to as «formative» and «summative» feedback [3], that is a feedback and correction at different stages in the writing process, not only at the end.

There exist a number of techniques and tools for teachers to deal with students' written errors. One of the widely used is mentioned by a Brazilian author Maria Alice Antunes, who suggests using a system of symbols to mark written work [1, p. 31]. She says that some of the symbols used, such as *T* (wrong verb tense), *Sp* (wrong spelling) and *P* (wrong punctuation) are regarded to be more helpful than *Gr* (wrong grammar) and *V* (vocabulary), the symbols covering the broadest areas.

Others, like K. Jackson, are in favor of breaking down the large category of «grammar» into subcategories, e.g. *grammar-concord*, *verb pattern*, *word order* etc. [2, p. 19]. She also thinks it helpful to provide a clear indication for students of where they could find the information necessary to correct the error – referring them to the relevant section of their course book or some other reference or grammar book, using the margin or a blank line between each line of writing.

Once the students have seen the list of error categories, they may be given photocopied examples of marked work from other classes at the same level to provide them with as many examples as possible of mistakes which fall into the different categories. Class discussion of why a particular error falls into a particular category and how it might have been corrected may be a follow-up activity.

«Vocabulary» is another huge area which also can be usefully divided into smaller units, such as *collocations* and *not appropriate*. Using the term *wrong word* rather than *vocabulary* may also be less intimidating for the students. Nevertheless, they will continue to have difficulty in correcting in this area unless some time is spent on familiarizing them with monolingual dictionaries and how to extract the information they need from them. Here learner training activities and dictionary quizzes designed to show students the range of information they can find in an entry can be very useful. However, students also need to be made aware of *how* the information is expressed, often through abbreviations and example sentences provided in the dictionary.

Different authors [2, 6, 7] stress students' confidence in their ability to correct mistakes without the teacher as a vital factor of self-correction. One way to build this is to get students to work in pairs on sentences put on the board or OHP. These can include those registered by the teacher during students' oral production in group and pair work. Flexibility and judgement are necessary in order not to discourage students by expecting too much too soon. For example, when they make errors attempting to use grammatical forms and lexis they are not familiar with, it is unlikely that referring them to their text- or grammar book will be enough. The teacher can choose to correct this type of error for the student, making a note to include it in future class work, if appropriate.

This type of guided self-correction is a long-term and complicated task. It takes class time and teacher commitment to implement, and the students' reaction to it will vary according to their individual learning styles and educational backgrounds. In the long-term perspective students can be shown how it can be used to analyze and record the mistakes they make and how these may vary according to the type of text involved (letter, essay, report, etc.); it will also allow them to evaluate progress. If the teacher is lucky enough to teach the same class for more than one academic year or to have several lessons a week with them, the technique lends itself to becoming progressively less guided as the students' confidence and competence grow. Peer correction, using the same system of codes/abbreviations, can be introduced as soon as the students are used to having work marked this way. Teachers can decide to focus on one type of error only when marking a piece of work, e.g. use of articles, and then simply indicate in their marking which line contains an error, leaving the student to identify where the error is and correct it. Finally, the teacher can take the stress out of the least guided forms of correction by just indicating the number of errors without specifying their place and type. Mario Rinvolutri suggests turning this type of correction into a team game or dictation [4].

The most advanced stage of student self-correction seeks to develop their independent «error-identifying» skills and may take the following eight forms:

1. All students are given a copy of the same text, which contains several errors. As the teacher reads through the text at a carefully chosen pace, students raise their hands to indicate errors. At its simplest the focus may be on one error category only, with the teacher gradually increasing the pace, but this basic strategy offers many variants. For example, differently colored cards may be held up to indicate different error categories. A class may be divided into competing teams. Teams of students can prepare texts to be used with other teams, using unobvious mistakes trying to catch out their opponents.

2. A faulty text is provided and the total number of errors is announced (as further help, the error categories may also be given). Students work together in teams to discover all the errors as quickly as possible.

3. Students sit in circle and each makes as many corrections as possible to the same faulty text. The copies are then passed on to the next person in the circle and again corrected, and so on. The winner is the last student still able to find errors to correct.

4. Each student corrects their own work and produces an error count. Working with a partner on both their pieces of work will increase this. Finally, working in fours, they should be able to identify even more errors in each piece as skills are shared.

5. A text with corrections is given out and students have to discuss the errors and suggest ways of categorizing them.

6. Each student has a fully corrected piece of their own work and identifies the error categories. Sharing the task with others should clarify the chief language interaction errors.

7. Students correct their own work and prioritize the errors which they will then target in their future work. Each has a partner for help in checking for the target errors in future.

8. A record of progress is shared by teacher and student. This may include quantitative measures such as marks, but should also show qualitative change as some problems are overcome, new issues arise and new contexts for language use are explored, e.g. «real-life» communication.

Summing up all the above said, we may state that corrections should be well judged in quantity for motivation, and well designed in quality for understanding. Knowing one has made errors is of very limited use compared to having explanations which will help avoid them in future.

Greater use can often be made of peer teaching, and the skills of self-correction and of active response need to be taught rather than assumed. Teacher and student can progress more rapidly and pleasantly as a team with a common purpose. This empowers the learner and provides a model for continuing to learn through life.

The trends of further work in the area of self-correction techniques and activities might deal with greater specialization in correcting concrete types of mistakes (lexis, grammar, style, pragmatics, spelling, punctuation), differentiating those techniques and activities depending on the level of language proficiency of learners, starting with the elementary one, as well as designing self-correction methodologies meant specifically for written and oral output.

As Jon Taylor puts it, «complete autonomy will not be the final destination for the majority of students and may remain a mirage on the horizon forever» [7, p. 10], nor will achieving native-like fluency and accuracy ever be their objective. However, self-correction techniques can help student make progress on both these parallel journeys, on the one hand preparing them to take some responsibility for what they learnt and on the other by giving them means to analyze, understand and learn from their mistakes. Increasing learner autonomy requires corresponding changes in teachers, too, the most difficult of which may be letting students do their speaking or writing without jumping in with the correct answer.

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*Надійшла до редколегії 22.02.11*