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## VII. EGYÉB TUDOMÁNYTERÜLETEK (MATEMATIKA-OKTATÁS, TANÁRKÉPZÉS)

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNER TRAINING AS A TOOL TO HELP DEVELOP AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS

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#### **Introduction**

Only in recent years has research into second language acquisition addressed the issue of teaching learners how to learn and started to examine the conscious efforts learners make to learn a language. The reason being, that the process of learning was thought to be a very personal and individual process which was considered hard to define and rather subjective to be 'scientifically' investigated. However, there were researchers who, in close collaboration with educationists, persevered and insisted on letting learners 'grow up', i.e. on the one hand, become less dependent on the teacher and on the other, become more responsible for their own learning.

Through learner diaries, interviews and 'think-aloud' reports, researchers have managed to gain some insight into the process of learning and have managed to compile a list of strategies learners resort to in order to facilitate their learning.

These investigations have led educationists to claim that by giving learners a greater responsibility in their learning, we are, in fact, making them more motivated, as well as more sensitive to the importance of critical reflection and exploration in learning.

So let us now see how emphasis in recent years has shifted towards learner-training and how self-directed learning is becoming increasingly important in the teaching-learning process. The issue of learner-training is one that we in Hungarian higher education need now to address with growing interest as the

number of classroom contact hours is diminishing while the material that students need to internalise is increasing from day to day.

## ***1. Learner-training***

To be able to better appreciate the change in emphasis from teacher-training to learner-training, we should first take a brief glimpse at the traditional approach to teaching.

### *1.1 The traditional learning experience*

The traditional attitude to language learning, in many places, still is that it is the teacher who is solely responsible for learning in the classroom; the learner is merely thought of as the passive recipient of the knowledge disseminated by the teacher. Most learners are not concerned with learning for the sake of knowledge, only for grades and to pass examinations. This learner attitude is the straightforward consequence of the teachers' role in the teaching-learning process, namely, that she is the one who determines the learners' objectives mostly on the basis of a prescribed syllabus, she selects the materials she thinks are relevant to the learners' needs and interests, decides on the classroom procedures, allocates the time to be spent on each topic or language item and finally, evaluates and assesses the learners' progress and decides on the remedial work, if necessary.

In sum, what is to be learnt, how it is to be learnt and when is imposed on the learners by the teacher who claims to know best what their needs are and how to satisfy these needs. All this the teacher does without consulting the learners at any point. The teacher's intentions may be well-meaning, but the hidden message communicated to the learners is obvious: the teacher is responsible for everything inside the classroom. This, in turn, shapes the learners' attitudes and expectations as regards learning, i.e. the learners remain uninterested and passive, expecting to be spoonfed. However, if teachers themselves recognise and do everything in their power to make students aware of the fact that "learning is something which can only be done by a learner, not something which can be done to or for ...[him]" (Riley 1982:61), then this would bring about a change in both their attitudes to the teaching-learning process.

### *1.2 Changing attitudes*

Several educationalists and researchers today are of the opinion that "good teaching is helping-to-learn; it renders the individual independent and responsible". (Riley 1982:61) So, if teachers want to promote learner independence and responsibility, they should encourage learners to adopt the strategies of good language learners and ensure that classroom activities provide learners with opportunities to practise the more self-reliant forms of learning.

This can be achieved through the process of learner-training which, in general terms, can be considered a way of improving language learning and, more

specifically, as a way of meeting learners' individual needs. Language learning is enhanced through an awareness raising process which increases the learners' awareness of themselves as learners, of their roles and responsibilities, as well as of the tasks and strategies they should perform and employ. This new approach to learning brings about a change in the traditional teacher-learner relationship.

The teacher, in this context, is viewed as a helper not as a figure of authority. She functions as a facilitator and counsellor who gives advice, provides explanations, helps find suitable materials and suggests activities or procedures. Thus, teaching, as Holec (1987:153) points out, can be considered as a "series of methodological proposals" from which the learner is free to select, test and adapt the strategy that best suits his purposes.

Given this freedom of choice and opportunity to make decisions about their own learning helps learners adopt an active attitude towards their work, as well as creating a feeling of involvement (Rubin 1981). To be able to make appropriate decisions and choices about their learning, learners have to be methodologically and psychologically prepared (Holec 1980). Psychological preparation is done through discussions with the teacher, as a result of which, the learner is gradually "deconditioned" (Holec 1980:41), i.e. by understanding the significance of the approach and what he is required to do, the learner modifies his previous preconceptions and prejudices about language and learning. Methodological preparation involves the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and techniques that will enable the learner to fulfil his role.

Wenden (1987) says learner-training should be incorporated into the teaching-learning process because it is generally acknowledged that learning is more effective if it can be related to the objectives it serves. The basic methodology for learner-training should be "discovery" (Holec 1980), i.e. the learners should be allowed to gradually discover, through a process of trial and error, the knowledge and the strategies that will best help them in attaining their objectives.

So, then, why is learner-training important? As a result of learner-training, learners develop abilities to become successful classroom learners, i.e. they learn to make the best use of classroom learning time, while awareness equips them with strategies that enable them to go out of the classroom and learn for themselves. Through this process, learners become able to identify their individual approach, they are encouraged to adopt the strategies of good language learners as well as an active attitude to learning. Learner-training is also an attractive alternative to the traditional teacher-centred approach because learners are free to make decisions and choices about their own learning.

Learner-training, Dickinson (1987) asserts, requires discretion and patience; the learner should be allowed time to reflect on what he is doing and build up an understanding of what adopting an active role to learning means. The 'product' of learner-training is a self-directed and, ultimately, an autonomous learner.

### *1.3 Self-directed, autonomous learning*

Self-directed learning is about "freedom and control" (Dickinson 1978:9) which refer to the learner's freedom of making choices about and controlling his own learning either independently or as a result of consultations with the teacher. So, a self-directed learner is responsible for drawing up his own learning objectives, for monitoring his own progress and the relevance of his studies to the objectives, as well as for continuous self-assessment. Carver and Dickinson (1982:15) see the learner's responsibility more as an "attitude of mind than behaving in a particular way". This means that the learner working alone, or in pairs, or in groups following his learning programme, continuously monitors and evaluates his progress, as well as the relevance of his studies to the objectives he is working towards and if he encounters difficulties, he does not gloss over or hide the fact, but seeks help from the teacher who, in turn, directs him to the necessary resources from which he is again free to choose the one most relevant to his needs.

From the above it transpires that learning cannot be ad hoc; it requires preliminary planning and ongoing monitoring to be successful. Carver (1984) maintains self-direction can be most effectively developed if teachers, through negotiation, help learners generate their own plans for learning. These plans should contain, at least, the following points: objectives, time allocation to specific tasks and practice, list of materials, strategies to be employed, and techniques for monitoring and self-evaluation.

There are varying degrees of self-directed learning: "partial" and "total". (Dickinson 1987:8) The former, the more common of the two, can be annexed to conventional class instruction while the latter is totally independent of formal instruction and is referred to as learner autonomy. An autonomous learner undertakes the whole of his learning without any direction from the teacher; autonomy is the result of the "learners' developing a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". (Little 1990)

## **2. *Learner-training in the teaching of languages***

Language teaching in Hungary mostly follows a set practice: teacher-centred classes where the decisions are made, on the basis of a prescribed syllabus, by the teachers alone. Up till now teachers have not felt it necessary to consciously address the issue of teaching learners how to learn, simply because general practice and tradition did not require them to do so and because of the widespread belief that students have been learning for most part of their lives, so, obviously they are aware of what they should be doing. The problem with this view is the absence of the realisation that formal learning is often divorced from the real world, it does not always spring from internal motivation, is rarely based on individual needs and does not usually cater for individual differences. Thus, it lacks efficiency and effectiveness.

The introduction of learner-training would mean a welcome change from the traditional teacher-centred approach as it would help put the learner, his needs and how he learns into focus. Learner-training could be used to advantage in such areas as evaluation, the setting up of goals and sub-goals, the choosing of supplementary materials, types of activities and learning strategies. This would not require much extra effort from the teacher, and it would be extremely beneficial to the learners because putting them in a position where they can make decisions and choices as regards their learning programme would help to make them feel more responsible for and become more involved in their learning.

In everyday teaching practice, however, teachers and students rarely talk about anything else but the prescribed material itself; teachers do not take time to talk students through the course requirements and do not invite suggestions as to what the students would like to do, what they feel would be useful for them. So, in the absence of a detailed course outline, from the students' point of view it would seem that teaching is rather haphazard and not really planned.

The students get the same impression even if they learn from one textbook but have more than one teacher because, in many cases, there is a lack of coordination among the teachers as regards not just the methodology used with the textbook, but also the type and quantity of supplementary materials given. However, if learners were given a detailed outline of the programme with the suggested goals and sub-goals which they participated in setting up with the guidance of a teacher who made a special point of drawing on the students' previous language learning experiences and their knowledge of the world, and who would devote time to discussing with the students the possible approaches to the topics, the illocutionary acts, language items and vocabulary involved, then this would constitute a start to the students' knowing what their learning programme is like and where they are going and how. Such a plan for beginner level language students could look something like the following:

Centrally determined objectives	Goals set up by the teacher, but can be subject to negotiation	Alternative routes to the teacher, but can be followed. Students may, choose their own supplementary materials.	learning. Suggested by subject to negotiation. path they want to with the help of the own supplementary
1. Work and leisure	1.1. Daily routine	1.1.1. Reading text on daily routine. Answer comprehension questions.	1.1.1.1. Use of the Simple Present tense.
			1.1.1.2. Place of Frequency Adverbs
			1.1.1.3. Practice ways of telling the time.
			1.1.1.4. Talking about your own daily routine.
		1.1.2. Listen to people talking about their daily routines. Fill in the questionnaire. (Guided listening)	(The four sub-goals above could be the same for 1.1.2. and 1.1.3.)
		1.1.3. Cut out clock and pictures. Match activities and times.	
	1.2. Talking about jobs		
	1.3. Hobbies, leisure pursuits		

The alternative pathways to learning in the suggested plan take into account the fact that individual students learn differently: there are some who are more visual, others want everything written down, still others learn by listening and repeating. Naturally, students are welcome to choose more than one alternative.

The sub-goals in the plan bring the class together again because everybody is working on the same tasks, but the order in which they complete them may differ according to the students' preferences. It is important to relate the sub-goals, as far as possible, to the students' own experiences in order to facilitate learning.

As the students work towards the set goals and sub-goals, they can keep varying their learning programme taking into account the changes in their needs because the situation that originally motivated them changes or because during their course of learning they realise that certain sub-goals are unattainable, or they discover an area in their knowledge where they need practise.

The teacher could also encourage them to set up other sub-goals and choose their own supplementary materials. An example of this would be the students' setting the goal of reading a graded reader of their choice every week and then talking about what they have read in their groups or with another student. They could also devise short questionnaires to elicit such information as how many characters the story had, what they looked like, what the relationship of the characters was, where the story took place, etc. To train the students in the necessary reading skills, the teacher could include intensive reading sessions in the classroom work focusing on practising reading strategies such as using a dictionary, making a vocabulary book, guessing from the title and/or illustrations what the text is about, skimming, scanning, reading for gist, etc., as well as on text organisation and on understanding the socio-cultural background and the wider implications of the text.

Another issue to be discussed when planning the learning programme, is time allocation, i.e. how much time do learners have on each topic and how much practise should they be putting in outside the classroom. In fact, teachers should spend more time talking to their students about the kinds of language learning activities they engage in outside the classroom because this would also give them an insight into the learning styles preferred by the students and they could, on the basis of this information, help them more efficiently and effectively by suggesting various strategies that would facilitate their learning. For instance, if the student likes learning words, the teacher could suggest ways of organising them to facilitate memorisation. One such way could be to group them under various topic headings, another could be to arrange them in a way as to show useful related words and also to give sample sentences.

Involving students in drawing up objectives and making decisions about the materials are two ways of ensuring active participation in the learning process and increasing the students' intrinsic motivation. This helps to build up the students' self-esteem and makes them feel good about themselves.

To further increase motivation and involvement, as well as to facilitate learning students could be encouraged to try out different learning strategies. As they are experienced language learners, they will probably have various strategies for processing new information so, teachers could start by getting learners to reflect about these strategies and about themselves as language learners. Teachers could get the learners to fill in a questionnaire, in their L1 as they are beginners, for instance, on how they learn best: by doing and through practise, through grammar explanations, by memorisation, by writing everything down, by translation, through communication with native speakers, by listening and repeating, etc. Spaces could also be left for the students to put down any other strategies that haven't been mentioned, but they use. Then, the teacher could get them to discuss their answers with the other students in the group and compile a list of the various ways in which they learn and rate these strategies in terms of "frequency of use, enjoyment, usefulness and efficiency". (Allwright 1980 quoted in Carver 1984:129)

They could also be asked to reflect on the extent their learning style was catered for in the past and to give their views on pair- and groupwork. This could give teachers an insight into students' learning styles and help them in devising classroom activities.

At this stage, the teacher could also discuss the students' expectations and attitude as regards the textbook; whether they see it as a resource and reference book to facilitate self-study or as something to be learnt from cover to cover. Students should be trained in using the textbook in a 'non-linear' way (Carver 1984), i.e. use it to look things up in. In order to train them in this skill, students could be given such tasks as to look up information in the book, note down where they found it and the explanation, if any, given by the book. They could also be asked to make a list of their expectations of a textbook: should it contain detailed grammar explanations and exercises, a dictionary, a summary of each unit, explanations only in their own language, information on the target language culture, etc. Then the students could examine the textbook they intend to use to see whether and to what extent it complies with their expectations. Finally, the students could make a list of how the textbook could be improved, for instance, if students require grammar explanations, they could set about compiling their own reference grammar and making it available to all the students in the group.

If the students have positive learning strategies, they should be encouraged to use these, but they can also learn new strategies so, from the very beginning of their English studies, students could be encouraged to employ a whole range of learning, communication and social strategies which will help them develop their own personal learning style and become good language learners.

In the initial stages of the course, cognitive learning strategies such as various techniques for memorisation, for extensive and intensive listening, for guessing, for grouping and/or matching various language items, as well as repetition and translation could be practised.

Metacognitive learning strategies are also important in getting learners to think about the learning process, to become conscious of themselves as learners and to process feedback on written and oral work. These strategies together with continuous monitoring enable the students to keep track of their progress and enhance their feeling of responsibility for their own learning.

Training students to evaluate themselves is all the more desirable because, in many cases, teacher assessment is not ongoing and the giving of feedback is not always continuous. This practice, only too often, gives rise to misconstrued conceptions of ability and knowledge on the students' part. However, as a result of learner-training, students could be taught to evaluate themselves in terms of progress and the usefulness of the strategies employed. In order to do this, students could be asked to keep a record, i.e. a diary, of their own progress including, if they wish, the areas covered during the term. These notes could then be used to discuss with the teacher the implication of the results and decide on remedial work, or how the student should proceed. Students can also be encouraged to mark their own and fellow students' work according to some



predetermined criteria, or to grade themselves, or even to construct tests for themselves and/or their fellow students. These tests can, for instance, be cloze tests of reading texts or newspaper articles. Students could also be encouraged to form self-help groups to discuss their learning problems and to try and find some sort of solution to them.

Familiarising students with communication strategies would also be important because most teachers turn a blind eye to students' translating in mid-conversation if their partner fails to understand what is being said. Thus, students could learn to compensate for inadequate resources through paraphrasing and restructuring; they could also learn to use non-verbal cues, repetition, or ask for clarification.

Another area where learner training would be important, is group- and pairwork. Although they are relatively widespread in language teaching, the activities students are asked to perform do not require real collaboration on tasks or exchange of information. Students tend to work alone and then just tell the others what they have been doing. So, apart from giving students activities which require exchange of information, they should also be trained in how to work in groups, i.e. how to take turns, hold the floor, state their arguments, etc. Groupwork helps reduce anxiety when competitiveness within the group is exchanged for cooperative work thus, making learners feel less inhibited and more willing to join in the discussion. Such an anxiety free environment is conducive to learning.

In sum, learner-training would enable teachers to cope, to a certain extent, with the individual differences in learners. It would also help learners develop responsibility for their learning and encourage them to become active in planning their learning programme, the strategies and materials they want to use and in evaluating and monitoring their own progress.

Successful learner-training would enable students to transfer the acquired skills to other areas of study, thus enabling them to plan and manage their own learning with no, or very little help from a teacher. Once they realise it is not the college's task to teach them everything and that learning is a lifelong process, especially if they want to keep up with the latest developments of their chosen profession or just simply maintain, or add to their existing language knowledge, they will more readily accept the fact that they should become autonomous learners.

## *Conclusion*

The thoughts of the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius capture the very essence of learner-training:

"If you give a man a fish, you feed him for one day.

If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

So, if learners are taught how to learn, how to make informed decisions and choices about their learning, i.e. to feel responsible, they will be able to use this knowledge and skill all through their lives as a tool to help them develop their competence in not just one, but several areas.

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