

## SUPPORTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COURSE

### ПІДТРИМКА САМОСТІЙНОСТІ УЧНЯ В АНГЛІЙСЬКІЙ МОВІ ДЛЯ ПЕВНИХ ЦІЛЕЙ

*Learner autonomy, which has been a key area of interest in the field of foreign language acquisition for over 40 years is becoming a prerequisite of quality education. Little attention in the extensive literature available has been given, however, to the promotion of learner autonomy at tertiary level in the English for Specific Purposes context. The article addresses this gap by exploring some practical ideas regarding students' autonomy support within ESP teaching/learning contexts through a small-scale case study of using the electronic Professional Language Portfolio. The Portfolio was specifically designed for students of our university majoring in Finance and Banking and was tailored to meet objectives of modules "Effective Presentations" and "Effective Meetings", which make the bulk of the course and are relevant to students' future specialism. The research proves that the integration of the Professional Language Portfolio contributes to promoting students' autonomy and critical awareness of learning styles under condition of a democratic model of learning. Students need to know that their views and role in teaching/learning process are valued. The results of the experimental stage reveal that the integration of the Professional Language Portfolio in the current ESP practice can increase students' motivation, lead to a higher level of their classroom activity and active involvement in the educational process, involve students into organization of ESP training as a whole. Methodologically, learner autonomy starts with the premise that autonomous learners take responsibility for their own learning; they can identify their learning goals and their learning processes; they can evaluate their learning; they have well-founded conceptions of learning and their own learning styles; they can organize their learning; they have good information processing skills; they are well motivated to learn. The research emphasizes the role of the Professional Language Portfolio as an effective tool to enhance students' capacity in these areas.*

**Key words:** *English for Specific Purposes, learner autonomy, Professional Language Portfolio, identify learning goals, take responsibility for one's own learning, facilitate, reflection.*

*Навчальна автономія залишається однією з ключових тем у галузі методики викладання іноземної мови вже майже сорок років поспіль, а на сучасному етапі вона стає передумовою якісної мовної освіти. Однак*

*у великому розмаїтті наукової літератури проблемі навчальної автономії в контексті вивчення/викладання англійської мови спеціального вжитку у закладах вищої освіти приділяється недостатньо уваги. Стаття намагається усунути зазначену прогалину, досліджуючи деякі практичні ідеї щодо розвитку автономії студентів шляхом аналізу конкретної ситуації використання електронного професійного мовного портфоліо в курсі ділової іноземної мови. Професійне портфоліо було розроблено для студентів економічних спеціальностей нашого університету в рамках модулів «Ефективні презентації» та «Ефективні зустрічі», які становлять основну частину курсу та пов'язані з майбутньою спеціалізацією студентів. Авторами доводиться, що застосування професійного мовного портфоліо сприяє розвитку самостійності студентів та критичного усвідомлення ними стилів навчання за умови демократичної моделі навчання. Студенти мають усвідомлювати важливість своїх поглядів та ролі у процесі вивчення/викладання англійської мови спеціального вжитку. Результати експериментального дослідження показують, що інтеграція професійного мовного портфоліо в сучасну практику підвищує мотивацію студентів, призводить до їх активного залучення до навчального процесу, покращує їх рівень володіння мовою, розвиває рефлексивні здібності та стимулює навчання упродовж життя.*

*З методичної точки зору навчальна автономія характеризується відповідальністю студентів за власне навчання: вони здатні визначати свої навчальні цілі та навчальні процеси; оцінювати свої досягнення; ефективно організувати своє навчання; мають об'єднані концепції та власні стилі навчання; добре сформовані навички обробки інформації; їм притаманний високий рівень мотивації. У статті робиться висновок про те, що професійне мовне портфоліо може слугувати ефективним інструментом для підвищення спроможності студентів у цих сферах.*

**Ключові слова:** *англійська мова спеціального вжитку, навчальна автономія, професійне мовне портфоліо, визначати цілі навчання, брати відповідальність за своє навчання, сприймати, рефлексія.*

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**Statement of the problem and its relation to important practical tasks.** The intention of our country to join the European Higher Education Area sets challenging tasks for Ukrainian universities to develop students' competences and strategies needed to function effectively in the academic and professional situations they encounter and to facilitate their mobility and competitiveness in the national and international job markets. Professional education in Ukraine highly integrates language skills into the context of a particular specialism, and the demand for

English as an essential element of generic job-related skills in a variety of professional areas has exploded in the last decade. Many university policy-makers view foreign language proficiency as one of the components of graduates' professional competences, formulated in the qualification profiles of university degree programs.

Despite considerable positive changes, which English for Specific Purposes (hereinafter ESP) teaching, learning, and assessment in Ukraine has undergone recently, there is still a gap between the

target situation (employment market) needs and existing foreign language proficiency of learners. On the one hand, the majority of university entrants do not meet the National secondary school standard of B1+, and on the other –by a mismatch between societal expectations and the insufficient number of class hours allotted to an ESP course by universities. As foreign language learning goes far beyond compulsory education, the increasing role of students' independent work can become a major factor for the development of such innovative educational trend as autonomy.

Learner autonomy is of particular importance in the context of COVID-19 pandemic which has intensified online and individual learning, shaping some problems educational systems worldwide have faced recently. Today it is becoming a prerequisite of quality education. The factors mentioned above determine the relevance of this research to the current ESP practice.

#### **Analysis of recent research and publications.**

The concept of educational autonomy, which has been a key theme in the field of foreign language learning at tertiary level for over 40 years is generally viewed through two factors: learners ability to assume responsibility for their own learning and the learning environment to provide opportunities for the learner to take control of their learning. The first factor requires a set of personal qualities: confidence, motivation, taking and accepting responsibility, and ability to take initiative. The second factor is connected with learner's dependence upon teachers to create and maintain learning environments that support the development of learner autonomy [11, p.56].

Main idea behind learner autonomy according to H. Holec is that students should take responsibility for their own learning, rather than be dependent on the teacher [7, p.198]. They should progress from tradition of passivity, of a spectator of learning process to self-development for choice and responsibility across all spheres of their learning experience. P. Benson defines the autonomous learner as one that constructs knowledge from direct experience, rather than one who responds to someone's instruction [1, p.165]. For Hayo Reinders, learner autonomy is a mindset, a way of thinking about learning as a journey where you decide where to go, and how to travel [10]. These understandings of the nature of learner autonomy seem to be well-established in the scientific literature as well as the issues of institutional and individual constraints on autonomy, learning opportunities to foster autonomy, understandings of learner autonomy in various cultural contexts, etc. [1,4,7,10]. Little attention has been given, however, to the promotion of learner autonomy at tertiary level in the ESP context.

**Formulation of the article's goals.** This study addresses this gap by exploring some practical ideas

about supporting students' autonomy within ESP teaching/learning contexts through a small-scale case study of using electronic Professional Language Portfolio (hereinafter PLP). The paper also aims to find out through qualitative analysis of collected data whether integration of PLP can result in an improvement of students' English language proficiency level and their overall performance in ESP classes.

**Presentation of the basic research material.** It is not our intention to enter into a substantial discussion of theoretical background to the issue, instead, it seems reasonable to emphasise some points in terms of their practicality. In an ESP setting, learner reflection can be enhanced by fostering classroom interaction via Dam's [4, p.70]. five questions:

- What are we doing?
- Why are we doing it?
- How are we doing it?
- How successful is our learning?
- What are we going to do next?

However, it is worth noting here that not all students are capable of taking learning into their own hands. Despite their psychological and linguistic readiness to be active participants of the educational process, they are not able to organize their independent work as a consequence of authoritarian learning environment. Some of them rely on the teacher and believe that they can learn by being mere passive receivers of information. In such a case, it is necessary for the teacher to explain the rationale and benefits of reflection to the students. Accordingly, V. Kohonen, U. Pajukanta [8, p.80]. state that when students notice the purpose of reflection, they have crossed the main motivational threshold for the reflective language learning.

As "any change initiative needs to be founded on a clear understanding of the status quo and also of the reasons for undertaking the change"[2, p.32], students need to know that their views and role in teaching/learning process are valued. Thus, the classroom atmosphere that encourages reflection and their initiative should be created. As part of the preparation teachers talk to their students about what they aim to do and why, they explain their thinking and what it means for students.

In the course of implementing the PLP in ESP classes, reflective activities should be practiced in the target language to accomplish two main goals: promoting language learning and activating learners' ability to think in their target language; otherwise, their proficiency level is exposed to remain external to them [6, p.680].

The ideas below can be suggested for ESP teachers to advance learners' autonomy and to enable them to undertake more responsibility for their own language learning [9, p.56]:

- Making learners establish their own learning goals and be aware of them

- Suggesting active learning tasks and getting the learners to reflect on their learning strategies
- Letting them do group work or pair work and receive some reciprocal feedback
- Making the learners devise learning activities either at home or in the language class and utilize them in the language learning setting
- Giving the learners the chance to choose with whom they wish to work
- Devising discussion activities with the class
- Reflecting on prior learning.

The integration of autonomous learning into the current ESP practice requires the solution of a wide range of tasks, first of all – the establishment of equal partnership relationships between the teacher and the student; giving students a certain degree of freedom in choosing content, methods and means of learning; creation of an effective assessment system of their independent work, etc. In their turn, students should develop skills for self-control and self-assessment; understand the responsibility for the choices they make and the quality of knowledge they acquire. We assume that effective use of electronic PLP can facilitate solutions to these problems.

As the ESP course in our institution is provided in the second year of tuition and is built upon the five-credit foreign language course in the first year, 40 second-year students, majoring in Finance and Banking of Sumy State University, Faculty of Banking Technologies, were involved in this research.

The classes were conducted 2 hours per week in the the Fall Semester and 2 hours per week in the Spring Semester of 2019-2020 Academic Year. The students were required to take a placement test at the start of the course so that the teacher can group them according to their proficiency levels. These 40 students were all within the frame of A2 or B1 reference levels, lacking at the same time, self-confidence and self-recognition to learn a language.

With this in mind, an introductory session was held to discuss with the students benefits of using PLP, its functions, learning a language beyond the classroom, the characteristic features of a good dossier, etc. The students were invited to complete a pre-questionnaire which asked them about their previous experience in employing the English Language Portfolio (hereinafter ELP), types of ESP activities and the length of time spent on the activities. The pre-questionnaire shows that students had no previous experience relevant to the use of Portfolio and they did not know what the PLP or the ELP is.

A post-questionnaire was administered to the students after ESP course with the purpose of finding out whether the use of the PLP supported reflection and autonomous learning. The post-questionnaire focused on planning and monitoring learning and evaluating learning materials.

To test learner's communicative proficiency before and after the course, Placement Test and standardized Business English Certificate (BEC) tests (Preliminary and Vantage) were administered respectively.

To obtain results on student's performance during ESP classes observation sheets were used.

It is important to point out that in the ESP context students learn English to meet their specific needs by, as Dudley-Evans & St John [5, p.101]. suggest, concentrating on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres relevant to a specific discipline. It is up to the teacher to facilitate autonomous learning first and foremost through appropriate methodology. The common thread in teaching, learning and assessment of the ESP courses we provide is communicative methodology, which is currently recognized by the majority of ELT teachers as a dominant one.

The comprehensive approach which involves creative combination of practical, problematic and visual methods to teaching primary language skills for real-life academic and job-related areas and situations is adopted. This approach is action-oriented by its very nature in the sense that language learners have to perform certain tasks in certain conditions, and in the specific environment. As the courses we provide are professionally oriented and skill-based ones and their content is organized according to generic job-related skills required in a variety of professional areas and situations, students' needs which ensure the greatest relevance of language learning to their communicative competence in their target situation are given priority.

Accordingly, the ELP [3,9] was taken as a model for the development of the electronic PLP for students of our university. It was tailored to meet objectives of the ESP course and specifically designed to cover modules "Effective Presentations" and "Effective Meetings", which make the bulk of the course.

Like any other language Portfolio, PLP performs two main functions: reporting and pedagogic. As the Council of Europe is interested in facilitating students' academic mobility and validating national education certificates with internationally recognized standards, the reporting function of the PLP is to provide information to all stakeholders about the owner of the Portfolio, his/her language proficiency level, the experience of intercultural communication and samples of works selected by the owner of the Portfolio. Students gathered and organized the official documents which confirmed their language education, analyzed and assessed their skills and ability to communicate in a foreign language. This experience helped them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enable them gradually to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Thus, reflection as the main means of implementing the reporting function of the PLP,

promotes the development of the ability to learn and think critically.

The pedagogic function of PLP lies in stimulating, guiding and fostering the student in the process of learning, encouraging life-long learning, developing learning competences, enhancing students' motivation and autonomy. Since students are actively involved in the educational process, they had the opportunity to tell what they have already learned, what they are interested in, what they want to learn, what is hard to learn, which of the classroom activities they like and which not.

It is also important to stress that such components of the PLP as self-assessment grids for each module containing "I can ..." statements, tables for formulating individual learning goals (students independently choose their own goals and describe their implementation), experience of intercultural communication, the free way of compiling The Dossier facilitate students' self-initiated learning activities aimed at achieving a goal that they have recognized as a primary one at this stage.

However, it should be highlighted that for 15% of students it was difficult to plan implementation of their individual learning goals and 5% of them failed to formulate their goals at all. This can be accounted for the lack of motivation on the one hand, and limited experience of independent learning on the other.

Generally, the results of the post-experimental section indicate the effectiveness of the use of PLP in the teaching/learning process. Thus, students of experimental groups demonstrated 1.5 times better results of Business English Certificate (BEC) tests than students of control groups. It can be explained by the fact that they can effectively organize their independent work in English, become more productive and willing about what can be done, and progress more in the target language. Furthermore, the use of electronic PLP in the ESP course increased motivation of most of students to foreign language acquisition, which led to a higher level of their classroom activity and active involvement in the educational process remaining no longer indifferent to the teaching/learning materials and organization of ESP training as a whole. Students of experimental groups noted that it became easier for them to organize independent work not only in English, but also in other disciplines. Consequently, there is a positive transfer of acquired study skills to other areas. Moreover, the results of the study reveal that the integration of the PLP contributes to the learners' language learning process to a great extent in terms of promoting their self-confidence, self-reflection and self-assessment. The results of the survey demonstrate that 30 % of students intend to work with the Portfolio after completing the ESP course.

**Conclusions and perspectives for a further research.** From the description above, it feels reasonable to offer a few conclusions about what can

be learnt from the experience of supporting learner autonomy through integrating PLP in the ESP context:

Learner autonomy starts with the premise that autonomous learners take responsibility for their own learning: they can identify their learning goals (what they need to learn) and their learning processes (how they will learn it); they can evaluate their learning; they have well-founded conceptions of learning and their own learning styles; they can organize their learning; they have good information processing skills; they are well motivated to learn.

The PLP can serve as an effective tool for promoting learner autonomy and critical awareness of learning styles under the condition of a democratic model of learning. It can increase learners' motivation, develop their reflective capacities, stimulate them to take their own language learning initiatives and encourage life-long learning. The teacher's role is central in managing learning: giving inputs, providing feedback, offering and supplying help to students.

The formation of autonomy is a long-term process. It does not happen in one day and it never ends. It cannot be solved with the help of the above-mentioned instrument only. Careful systematic work is required on every contact lesson so that students receive an impulse that will enable them to effectuate foreign language acquisition. Therefore, further research is needed in such issues as the use of Internet technologies to effectuate autonomous ESP learning, activation of metacognitive skills, forms of teacher-students collaborative work to ensure partnership relationships and democracy throughout the learning process, etc.

Hopefully, the approaches adopted will develop students' capabilities as autonomous learners and ensure a match between their needs, the declared objectives of ESP teaching/learning and international levels of proficiency.

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