# PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING BY USING STUDENT JOURNALS

**Lulzime Kamberi, PhD**
State University of Tetova, Republic of Macedonia

**Abstract:**
This paper reports on a study conducted at SEEU (South East European University) in Republic of Macedonia promoting learner autonomy in language learning by using student writing in an EFL course. To encourage my students towards independent learning, improve their writing skills and extend their English language proficiency, I have introduced journal writing into my syllabus years ago. The study was conducted across one semester, in the year 2012. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 31 subjects who participated in this study were students from the English Department of the Languages Cultures and Communication Faculty. Journals were collected at regular intervals and subjected to a modified content analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) to identify the main themes related to learner autonomy and student experiences. Semi-structured interviews with volunteers were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of the content analysis.

**Key Words:** Autonomy, EFL, journals, reflections, students

**Introduction:**

In the *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics,* autonomy in learning is defined as "the principle that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it" (p.297); Furthermore, journal writing, according to Harmer (2008), "makes us reflect on what has happened, what we think or how we feel" (p.126). Nevertheless, autonomy in language learning is a relatively new concept of language learning in the western Balkans, therefore, it is sometimes difficult to engage learners in autonomous learning since it has not been part of their culture and their educational background.

To encourage my students towards independent learning, improve their writing skills and extend their English language proficiency, I have introduced journal writing into my syllabus. Journals have shown to be very useful in EFL teaching and learning since they not only are very motivating for students Kamberi (2010), but contribute to their language proficiency given that students revise the learning material covered in the classes and at the same time add to their learning. This paper, reports on a comparative study on journals, which reflected classroom learning experience, compared to topics students had to research themselves, in an autonomous way by writing papers related to aspects of various contemporary topics, such as GM food, Earth and Space, and Gender Issues and reflect on their learning experience outside the classroom. Additionally, they had to write research papers on the research topics. As Jordan (1997) has observed, journals help teachers to better understand their students by offering insights into the learner's experience; they give us "a sort or introspection…" (p.34), which on the other hand, provides direct and immediate feedback for teaching improvement. These journals have offered an insight on how students have approached the project, their research strategies and the success of the independent research and autonomous learning.

**Main Text:**

The term autonomy in language learning has been a topic of interest for many researchers in the past decades (Little, 1991; Benson 2001; Gardner, 2011; Dişlen, 2011. Swarbrick, 1994) suggests various ways of applying autonomous learning by stating that using role-plays, drama and creative writing contribute to autonomous learning and student motivation.

Arikan & Bakla (2011) have analyzed asynchronous learner autonomy in online blogs with 17 Turkish adult learners. The outcome of the study showed that students were very motivated and they were able to choose various reading texts from the internet. However, the participants were beginner level students and they encountered the difficulty with the new vocabulary the various texts contained. The study has shown that student were able to apply various strategies that fostered learner autonomy.

Dişlen (2011), has investigated freshman learner beliefs about autonomous learning in Turkey. The study has shown that student were partially aware of what autonomous learning is but needed more training on how to apply it since their past learning experience has been teacher centered.

Benson (2011) gives many definitions of autonomy and tries to compare various definitions of autonomy. He argues:

In general, we may be able to observe whether learners display a greater degree of control in particular aspects of their learning. For example, we may be able to say that they are more able to self-asses their learning, to reflect on the value of their learning activities, or to design their own learning programs (p.51).

In a way or another Benson's argument applies to the context of this study since students were able to display a greater degree of control over their learning, and were able to reflect on the value of their activities.

## 3. The foundation of this paper

In an effort to help my students learn more easily and improve their language skill, in reading, writing, listening and speaking, but also to encourage critical thinking and problem –solving, I have introduced journal writing into my syllabus years ago (see Kamberi, 2010).

This paper confirms the significance of student writing as a valuable tool for tertiary students learning foreign languages and promoting autonomous language learning through using journal writing. Furthermore, the study offers empirical evidence for the importance of promoting learner autonomy in foreign-language learning. From the multi-cultural perspective of the Macedonian undergraduate education, it provides practical evidence for the value of reflective free-writing in language and critical thinking development, a strategy for developing learner autonomy for teachers, researchers, policymakers and curriculum developers.

## 4. Research questions

Based on my professional teaching experience and informed by the emerging findings in the literature review above, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

- Are students able to develop autonomous learning strategies?
- What do students' journals show about the students' autonomous language learning experience?
- What is the students' experience related to autonomous learning?
- Are there any evident differences between the two approaches of journal writing?

## 5. The study

The study was conducted across one semester, in the year 2012. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 31 subjects who participated in this study were students attending my English Language Skills course in the English Department of the Languages Cultures and Communication Faculty (n=31).

## 5.1 Subjects

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the participants who participated in this study ranged in age from 19 - 21 years old. Females constituted 70% of the sample group with the reaming 30% being male.

### 5.2 Instrumentation

Journals were collected at regular intervals and subjected to a modified content analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003), to identify themes and topics. Semi-structured interviews with volunteer students were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of the content analysis. More precisely, thematic content analysis based on Neundorf (2002) have been made in order to "…measure psychological characteristics of individuals …"(p.192).

### 5.3 Data Collection and analysis

Journals were written on a regular basis and students were expected to write either on different topics covered in the class or, about a topic of their preference they had to research themselves but agreed in the classroom. In this case, journals were compared to those students had to research by their own and those that were a reflection to the classroom experience. They were advised to search online, from books or interviews. Additionally, they were given two weeks to finish the projects they researched independently compared to those related to the classroom which were assigned for the following class.

### 5.4 Research limitations

Content analysis of a significant sample on a regular basis demands a considerable effort from the analyst. It is unlikely that a single researcher could maintain this research load with a larger sample. As a consequence, it can be argued, one of the limitations of this study is its relatively small sample size. A second limitation derives from the convenience sampling approach with; in this case, its gender imbalance. In addition, as Paterson (1995) states, "students may write what the teacher wants them to write".

### 5.5 Results

Applying a modified content analysis as suggested by Fraenkel & Wallen (2003), findings from the study identified a range of positive and negative effects deriving from student journals and interview responses in response to learner autonomy which will be explained in detail below.

From the total sample (n=31), 21 students responded on the first research related to *food and drink*; 13 students responded to the *space and earth* topic; and 15 to educational technology (See table 1 below).

Table 1. Responses to journal writing

| Topic | Responses |
|---|---|
| Food and Drink | 21 |
| Space and Earth | 13 |
| Educational Technology | 15 |
| Classroom reflection journals | 27 |

While recognizing that the sample was too small to generate meaningful quantitative conclusions, the analysis of student journals has shown that students, who completed the assignment, were able to research individually and use a number of phrases related to respective selected topic. The majority of the students were able to research online, interview peers outside the classroom, and find various other sources in order to complete their assignments. As one student claimed "Having completed the paper, I can better argue on the topic". Another one stated, "When you use those facts, the paper changes completely". "we get arguments from different perspectives". Another student was shocked by the news she found related to the endangered earth. She states 'I had not known how big companies destroy the earth in order to make their own profit". Many found interviewing students outside the classroom very challenging since they could talke to students whose major was other than English.

Furthermore, apart from their general content knowledge related to various topics, they claimed to have learned a lot of new vocabulary and phrases related to the topics but in English

language. Phrases like, global warming, genetically modified food, skin disease, the ozone hole, naturally grown food,  organic and non organic food, were used by the majority of the respondents.

Another interesting result of the study is the difference between the quantities of the writing. Students were able to write more on the topics they were researching themselves than those covered in the classroom; however, they tend to plagiarize parts of their papers they had to research online which is impossible for those reflection-classroom learning experience. However, even though no discourse analysis has been used to analyze the data, it can be argued that the quality of both types of papers was the same.

Further, from student interviews it can be derived that students were not sure which strategy has been better because as they claimed, both approaches had their positive and negative sides. The classroom reflection had been easier because 'you have books and the notes you can refer to'. On the other hand, 'the independent searching', as it was called, had been very time consuming and required more sources. Some students that did not respond to the *independent* assignment and found it extremely difficult to do the assignment since they 'did not understand the vocabulary form the internet'. Others claimed they had had not enough time to finish it.

## Conclusion:

The results of the study have shown that writing is an important tool in learning and teaching a foreign language. From the various analysis of the strategies used in the study, from a learner's perspective, there were mixed perceptions regarding the two types of journal writing; classroom reflection, or autonomous research on various topics.

Furthermore, the research has shown that students who responded to the assignment, found it very motivating, but others who did not, time consuming. However, the analysis of student writings and the interviews have shown that student journal writing drastically dropped when they were asked to search on their own. For example, when students were assigned to write or reflect on topics related to the classes or their own experiences, around 90% of the students responded to the writing; however, when asked to research on a topic of their own, only 48% responded to the assignment. This leads to the tentative conclusion that students need to be more motivated and trained in developing learner autonomy, as Benson states 'students need to be trained in order to become autonomous learners.

However, several major explanations for these results deserve further consideration. For example, how much students have learnt and improved their writing is still unclear and difficult to measure. Even though students claim that they have learned a lot and the journals are the proof, further discourse analysis of case studies over a longer period of time is suggested. Similarly, there is some evidence that the way students believe they learn best, affects the way they approach learning tasks. Again, a further study of this observation seems likely to yield useful information for the most effective strategies in promoting learner autonomy in language learning. It is suggested that promoting learner autonomy is a process and some stages need to be followed: Raising awareness, Begin changing attitudes, Transferring roles (Sharle&Szabo, 2000). They further point out that training students and teachers is another important factor in developing autonomy in language learning.

## References:

Arikan, A. & Bakla, A. (2011).Learner autonomy online: Stories from a blogging experience. In D. Gardner (Ed.), Fostering autonomy in language learning (pp. 5-16). Gaziantep: Zirve University. Retrieved from http://ilac2010.zirve.edu.tr

Benson, Ph. (2001). Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning. Pearson Education.

Dişlen, G. (2011). Exploration of How Students Perceive Autonomous Learning in an EFLContext. In D. Gardner (Ed.), Fostering autonomy in language learning (pp. 5-16). Gaziantep: Zirve University. Retrieved from http://ilac2010.zirve.edu.tr

D. Gardner (Ed.), Fostering autonomy in language learning (pp. 5-16). Gaziantep: Zirve  University. Retrieved from http://ilac2010.zirve.edu.tr

Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2003). *How to design and evaluate research in education* 5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Gardner, D. (2011). Fostering autonomy in language learning. Retrieved from: http://ilac 2010.zirve.edu.tr/Fostering_Autonomy.pdf

Harmer, J. (2008). How to teach writing. Pearson Education (8th ed).

Hyland, K. (2010). *Second Language Writing*. (8th ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kamberi, L. (2010c). The Significance of Journal Writing for Tertiary  Level Foreign Language learners. Conference proceeding. 5th Annual South-East European Doctoral Conference. University of Sheffield. Thessaloniki, Greece.

Little, D. (1991). Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems. Dublin: Authentik.

Neundorf, K.A. (2002).*The content analysis guidebook*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Newham, L. and Pantebre, J.J. and Spark, M. (1999). Content and Discourse Analysis. Sourced 15 April 2009 http://www.bechervaise.com/DBAR2.htm

Paterson, B.L.(1995). Developing and maintaining reflection in clinical nursing. Nurse education today,15. Retrieved from: http://www.nurseeducationtoday.com

Richards, C. J.&Schmidt, R. (2002). *Dictionary of language teaching &Applied Linguistics.* Longman Pearson Education Limited, Edinburg Gate-Harlow.Essex CM 20 2JE,   England.

Swarbrick, A. (1994).Teaching modern languages. New York: Routledge.