Independent Learning in Secondary School - Key to Lifelong Learning

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1. Introduction

Independent learning has been a topical issue in foreign language learning for more than thirty years since the concept of learner autonomy was introduced. The milestone of the attitude change in Latvia could be considered the publication The European Language Portfolio which has a pedagogical function focusing on the development of learner autonomy and promoting lifelong learning.

Although a lot of discussions have been going on, not much has changed in schools which concerns independent learning skills. It is a two-sided problem: on the one hand, teachers are reluctant to change their teaching practices, on the other hand, students are not aware of the importance of independent learning skills. If upper-secondary school students have not become independent learners who are able to implement principles of self-regulation, they face a dramatic change in their further studies as university students. Independent learning skills can be acquired during regular classes at secondary school.

2. Independent learning skills in studying English

Language cannot be taught, it can be learned - but it happens when the student knows how to learn. Firstly, do students understand what learning is? According to James W.Keefe un J. M. Jenkins, learning has taken place when some changes in the student's behaviour can be observed as a result of the experience acquired during learning (Keefe and Jenkins, 1997). Learning is not memorizing, it is understanding and being able to make use of learning experiences. G. Petty claims that learning is an active process of meaning - making (Petty, 2004).

Next, upper-secondary school students may understand what learning is but do they understand what learning skills are? They may be aware of different learning strategies, but have they thought about their learning style and which learning strategies are the most appropriate? Claire E.Weinstein and Vicki L. Underwood explain that the term "learning strategies" is used in a very broad sense to identify a number of different competences which are necessary for effective learning and retention of information for later use. And these competences include cognitive information - processing strategies, active study strategies, support strategies and matacognitive strategies (Weinstein and Underwood, 1985). During English classes students develop their reading, writing, listening, speaking and independent English learning skills which include cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies which help students in constructing knowledge based on their experience and linked with the real world.

Teacher's role in the study process with the focus on independent learning has changed. If students are to take more responsibility for their learning, they should understand what learning is and how to learn. It means that teachers should guide their students in the study process so that they become independent or autonomous learners. Barbara McDevitt considers the final product of education to be a person who can study independently (McDevitt, 1997).

A survey was made to get more specific and detailed information about students' and teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards independent learning. Respondents of the survey were 318 upper-secondary school students and 52 teachers from ten schools in Latvia, both in rural and urban areas.

A group of statements were related to learning goals. Teachers' and students' responses to the statement "Learning goals are very important in the development of learning skills" differed - 53.8% of students fully agreed and 32.7% agreed, while 71.2% of teachers fully agreed and 26.9% agreed with the statement (p=0,032) which means that teachers are aware of the importance of setting goals in order to improve learning skills. At the same time 42.8% of students fully agreed and 32.1% agreed that they know what level of proficiency in English they want to reach on finishing secondary school, which means that they have set a learning goal. The number of teachers who fully agree that students know what level they want to reach on finishing school is lower - 19.2%, and 46.2% of teachers agree with the statement (p=0.030). This means that teachers should help students in setting learning goals, as goal setting is the basis of independent learning. Considerably different opinions were on the statement about students' ability of setting learning goals which they try to achieve. Students were much more positive about it - 22.3% fully agreed and 41.8% agreed, while just 17.3% of teachers agreed that students are able to set learning goals which they try to achieve (p=0.000). The results can be interpreted in two ways - students have poor self-assessment skills or/and teachers are not aware of studets' learning goals. In both cases there is a big need for work on independent learning skills for teachers and students.

Another group of statements were related to students' attitude towards learning. Students' and teachers' responses to the statement "I want to get better grades in English" were different - 68.6% of students fully agreed and 18.9% agreed, while just 15.4% of teachers fully agreed and 65.4% agreed with the statement that students want to get better grades (p=0.000). At the same time only 30.8% of students fully agreed and 39.0% agreed that they know how to implrove their English skills. Teachers had a similar opinion - 15.4% of teachers fully agreed and 53.8% agreed that students know how to improve their skills. This leaves much space for teachers' work in

helping students with learning skills because the results showed that students want to succeed but not always know how to do it.

3. Systemic approach to the development of independent study skills

In the process of development of independent study skills "learner support and guidance should be high at the beginning….and should smoothly decrease….until learners are able to perform the skills without support or guidance" (Merrienboer and Kirshchner, 2007:19). It could be called a model of shared responsibility which functions within the system Teacher - Student. Besides, there are many influences from other systems around. Nevertheless, it is possible to create a model of developing independent English study skills within formal school setting.

An action research was carried out during which a model of development of independent English learning skills was applied. The model consists of seven steps, each being implemented both during English classes at school and after classes independently:

1. during the English class students make self-assessment under the guidance of the teacher;
2. after school students learn about learning styles, study process and make self-assessment independently, during the English class students share their knowledge, they speak about their self-assessment with their classmates;
3. after school students think about their needs related to learning English, during the English class students share their opinions, they may modify their needs;
4. after school students set short-term and long-term goals so that they can satisfy their needs, during the English class students speak about their goals, they may be modified;
5. after school students select appropriate learning strategies, during the English class students share their experiences;
6. after school students study independently aiming at reaching their goals to satisfy their needs by applying appropriate learning strategies' during the English class students study in groups, share their knowledge and experiences;
7. after school students are able to assess their work as they know the requirements, during the English class students' self-assessment is compared with the teachers' assessment and conclusions made to start a new cycle.

Learning skills should be formed during classes at school but they have to be developed by students performing outside class activities. If the student gets into routine of connecting the study process in class with his/her activities outside class, he/she gets used to independent studies. (Bluma,2006;145).

The model was applied during English classes from Form 10 to Form 12. A survey was carried out at the beginning of Form 10, 11 and 12 to see the changes in attitudes and knowledge about independent study skills and choose the most appropriate teaching strategies. Respondents were 30 students of one English class.

During the initial stages of the model, attention was paid to setting short-term and long-term goals. Students' responses to the statement "Students themselves have to set learning goals" changed during the research - in Form 10 32.3% of students fully agreed with the statement, in Form 11 - 33.3%, but in Form 12- 51.7% of the students were completely convinced that students themselves have to set learning goals.

During next stages of the model attention was focused on learning strategies taking into consideration learning styles and knowledge on cognitive processes. The results showed that students became more confident about choosing appropriate strategies. Students' responses to the statement "Teachers have to tell students which tasks to do" changed during the research - in Form 10 29.0% fully agreed with the statement, in Form 11 - 6.7% and in Form 12 - 13.8% of the students fully relied on the choice of the teacher, The difference in opinions can be characterized by p=0.006 (Form 10 and Form 11) and p=0.003 (Form 10 and Form 12).

Even more, students' attitude changed concerning the choice of materials to be chosen for learning. Responses to the statement "Students themselves have to choose materials for learning" changed in the following way - 16.1% of Form 10 students agreed with the statement, 33.3% of Form 11 students agreed, but in Form 12 - 6.9% fully agreed and 34.5% of students agreed with the satement. The change in opinions can be characterized by p=0.048 (Form 10 and Form 12) and p=0.026 (Form 11 and Form 12). It means that students feel more confident about their independent learning skills.

During the action research students used portfolio in their independent learning process.

4. Portfolio as a tool used in the model of development of independent study skills.

The usage of portfolio in the learning process promotes the development of self-regulatory skills and sense of self-efficacy. It can be used in a flexible way but each portfolio should contain:
- all papers and taks written by the student in a particular period of time;
- evidence of independent work;
- student's self-evaluation and teacher's evaluation.

Portfolio is both structured and free as students can choose texts and materials they are interested in. When working on the portfolio, students work individually, in pairs and groups thus being able to learn from models.

Advantages of portfolio method:
- students take a bigger responsibility for studies;
- they learn to set goals;

- they are able to select appropriate material for studies;
- they learn time management;
- students develop skills of self-evaluation.

During the research students expressed their opinions on independent learning skills in an essay. Independent learning skills were understood as "skills to do things and solve problems". Students understand the importance of independent learning - "...skill to work independently is one of the most demanded quality which majority of employers are looking for in their potential employees....", even more, "being independent is part of becoming an adult". Independent learning is closely related to sense of responsibility - "...students realize that with every action comes responsibility ...and consequences...". Students understand advantages of independent learning - "...the teacher cannot pay his/her attention only to one student...", "Teachers cannot "feed" knowledge to their students."

5. Conclusion

The action research proved that students can develop independent study skills under the guidance of the teacher within the systemic model of shared responsibility. But the problem is two-sided and the solution of the problem lies in education and attitude of teachers towards independent learning skills.

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