



Personalized Learning, Self-Directed Learning, ICT and Student Motivation

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Abstract

The change from teacher-centered to student-centered learning- and teaching approaches that has been going on for decades as well as classroom heterogeneity have enhanced the importance of personalized learning-and teaching (P-learning) and learner autonomy.

At the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB) in Eisenstadt, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) has been used and refined in the English classes of the business related Master study programs for some years. It offers the students an autonomous approach to language learning by providing them the opportunity to define individual learning goals and choose individual learning tools to reach them. Students independently work on their SDL-project in their self-study time and realize it mainly by using online materials and specific online language-learning tools and/or apps. ICT enables students to access and use relevant teaching materials independent of time and place while at the same time it enables their teachers to monitor and give feedback at their convenience.

Self-Directed Learning, together with personalized feedback for the learners, are used to ensure that through partial degrees of freedom regarding place, time and content of the course, students can work on individual learning goals and, consequently, remain highly motivated.

Keywords: *P-learning, Self-Directed Learning, ICT, learner autonomy, E-learning, student motivation;*

1. Introduction

The fact that many language classes at universities and other educational institutions have become more and more heterogeneous in regards to native languages, cultures and also learning styles of the students, requires teachers to employ "different strategies, cultural experiences, vocabulary examples and techniques" [1] to deal with each of the learners. Apart from that, the general change from the teacher-centered to the student-centered classroom over the last decades, which has created an atmosphere in which students are more actively involved in the learning process than they used to be, has changed language learning and teaching, too.

2. Personalized Learning (P-learning)

The above mentioned new era of teaching started in the 1990s with people such as Mazur, who developed the concept of Peer Instruction to involve his students in the teaching process [4] or Alison King, who suggested that teachers step down the stage and leave it to the students. These concepts were the first steps towards P-learning and learner autonomy. P-learning refers to the effort to facilitate tailor-made teaching and cater to the individual needs of each student.

To support P-learning it is necessary to partly hand over the teaching process to the students and let them work autonomously and self-directedly. This means that students need to be involved more actively in the learning process by inspiring them to dissect and reassemble information "in a way that is personally meaningful to them so that they remember it more easily and are able to retrieve it when needed" [1]. However, it also means that students need to actively reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, identify goals and contemplate how they can best meet their needs.

3. Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and ICT

In the self-directed learning environment, the students are in the center amidst an impressive array of diverse tools they can choose from, with the teacher constantly revolving around them, not losing sight of the learners, their needs and their goals. Placing students in the center clearly exposes that each student has different strengths and weaknesses, needs to work on different skills, needs different teaching approaches, and has different learning styles or preferences.

SDL is an approach to learning and teaching that reaches and embraces this diversity in classrooms. Learners have the freedom to choose what they would like to work on and how they organize their work. They identify their specific learning needs, formulate their individual learning goals, determine



the resources they need to reach this goal, find learning strategies and assess and reflect upon the learning outcomes.

3.1. The SDL Process

At the beginning of the process, students reflect upon their skills and find an area of the language they would like to improve. As soon as they have found a focus, they need to formulate a SMART goal in a “Goals Proposal”, which also addresses anticipated supportive factors or limitations and functions as a constant reminder of what the initial goal was. Then, they create a timetable, and, subsequently, find helpful resources and tools that support them in achieving the set goals in the time available. With the goal in mind they start performing the tasks that help them train and improve the respective skills. After each learning-session, students need to provide evidence for their work by documenting the tasks they have performed in their online “Learning Diary”. Additionally, they assess themselves and reflect upon their learning experience so that they can adjust or modify their actions or strategies before continuing with the next learning-session. By consistently following these steps, learners are in a Feedback Spiral [1], which does not only help them to reach the language goals they have set, but also teaches them how to learn and be more effective in all subjects.

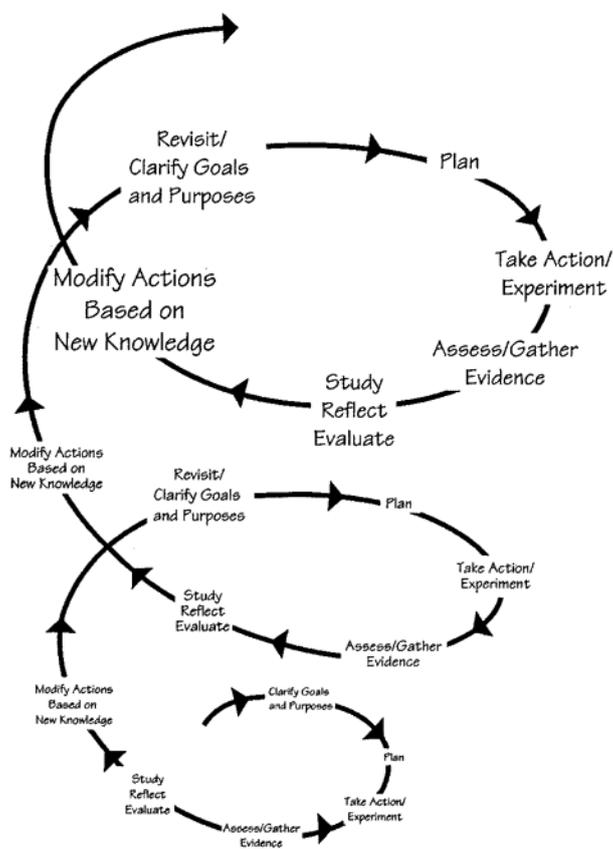


Fig 1: Feedback Spiral [1]

Self-directed learners need to be self-managing as they have to define goals and design a strategic plan; they are self-monitoring and find out what works and change strategy if necessary, and they need to be self-modifying as they reflect, evaluate, analyze and apply again. The facilitation of student autonomy naturally changes teachers’ roles, too, and they need to support learners in developing these dispositions.

Whereas teachers used to be the “sage on the stage” they have now shifted to being the “guide on the side” [3]. They have become facilitators, resource providers, guides, evaluators, critical thinking promoters and supporters, in addition to their role of a language expert. However, it is not only their way of teaching that has changed, but also the way of assessing students had to be adapted to this new form of teaching and learning. As each student has an individual learning goal, the form of

evaluation has to be personalized, too. Teachers, therefore, need to give constant constructive feedback regarding the students' progress during their learning process.

ICT is an integral part of the SDL work as there are numerous different language-learning tools and materials, from which students can choose, available online, and they can use different devices such as their mobile phones, tablets or laptops to work with them. Materials are provided for all different levels, learning types and skills, students can access independent of time and place and work at their own pace, while it enables their teachers to monitor and feedback at their convenience. This independence facilitates a constant exchange between teachers and learners, and, therefore, greatly enhances student motivation.

3.1. Self-Directed Learning and its implementation in the English courses of the International Business Relations (IBR) Master Program at the UASB

The English courses in the IBR MA program at the UASB are a combination of 20 face-to-face, 10 online and 20 self-study units, which are mainly used for the SDL work.

In the beginning of the first semester, students are introduced to the concept of SDL and its advantages, provided with useful resources and examples of how to find a focus, formulate goals and work on their project. Interestingly, most of the students have not had any experience with being an autonomous learner before, and it is crucial for the teacher to guide them carefully and offer regular support, especially in the initial phase. This happens either in the face-to-face but also in online sessions.

In the second phase, the teacher already guides the students towards reflecting upon their strengths and weaknesses, formulating a clear goal for the semester and finding appropriate resources. The "Goals Proposal", which has to be submitted in written form, is first discussed between peers in a face-to-face session in a "Conference With Critical Friends". This meeting offers students the opportunity to receive and give peer-feedback and modify the proposal before it is handed in to the teacher. The proposal does not only contain the focus and goal for the SDL work, but also an estimation of how reaching the goal might enhance the professional or personal life and how relevant it is. It should already contain the methods and tasks the student intends to use for the work, a reflection of strengths that might help to achieve this goal as well as potential limitations that might hinder them in the learning process. Then, teacher and student review the proposal together and edit, if necessary, before the students start working on achieving their goal over the semester.

In the third phase, after each of their learning sessions, students upload an entry in their online SDL Diary, where they document and reflect upon their learning experience. This serves the students and the teachers equally. On the one hand, learners themselves can see the progress they are making, and thoroughly reflecting upon the usefulness of tasks or methods shows them, what they might have to change to reach their goal. On the other hand, teachers are provided with the evidence that the students actually perform their SDL tasks, they can constantly monitor what individual students do, give feedback, and, therefore, accompany the student throughout their way.

At the end of the semester, students provide a "Reflective Report" in which they summarize and assess their learning experience and learning outcomes. This, together with the SDL Diary, is evaluated by the teacher using a performance-based rubric, assessing the students' development rather than their grammar skills.

Students' opinions regarding the concept of SDL are divergent. At the beginning of their studies, they seem to be a little overwhelmed by the freedom of choice and the transfer of responsibility from teacher to student. However, after having gotten used to autonomously working on a relevant goal, they seem to realize the advantages of this concept and they appear to be far more motivated than students who do not work with SDL.

It seems that self-directed students are in a continuous learning mode, strive for improvement, are critical thinkers, can cope with occasional failures better and are constantly improving and growing.

4. Conclusion

SDL as a part of P-learning is a highly effective way to enhance student motivation. The fact that learners have the opportunity to choose their own goals and work on them autonomously and independently, at their own pace, following their own needs, makes SDL extremely attractive to them. The SDL experience helps students to set realistic goals, design strategies and learn from their own experiences. It makes them reflective and critical thinkers, which supports them not only in their language classes but also in all other subjects during their studies.



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