Dorota Czerska-Andrzejewska

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMOUS EFL STUDENTS – THE NECESSITY AND REQUIREMENT OF PRESENT TIMES AND THE DUTY OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHER – ON THE EXAMPLE OF PEER FEEDBACK

Abstract: Autonomy and independence were the key values in Western European philosophy, psychology, politics and pedagogy in the 20th century. They are essential in the development of a democratic society (Benson and Voller, 1997). Autonomy in foreign language learning appeared in the 1960s and 1970s while in 1971 the Council of Europe established the Modern Languages Project and founded the Foreign Languages Didactic Centre (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France specializing in systems of learning in autonomy. The theories linking autonomy with peer feedback are those of Bound (1988) who defines the features and behaviour characteristics of an autonomous student. Bound (1988) suggests that an autonomous student undertakes initiative in the areas which require cooperation with other group members and being responsible for their development as well as considering a teacher to be an advisor is what brings autonomy close to peer feedback.

Peer feedback is one of the methods in teaching foreign languages where feedback to a student is given by another student, not a teacher. This allows for more opportunities for the student to learn from each other. Peer feedback in foreign language learning provides variety in teaching as well as develops students' autonomy in the learning process. Dam (1995) and Pawlak (2006) suggest that learner autonomy makes use of peer assessment in the form of peer support and cooperation, whereas the role of the teacher is that of a supporting scaffolding and creating room for the development of autonomy.

The aim of this article is to answer the question as to whether it is possible to achieve student autonomy in English by giving oral presentations and by being assessed by one's peers where the teacher's role is that of a supervisor, advisor and guide. In this approach the teacher is not the only person providing feedback.

Keywords: autonomy, development of autonomy, peer feedback, modern language teacher, responsibility of a learner, oral presentations

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical background of autonomy in learning

Autonomy and independence were the key values in Western European philosophy, psychology, politics and pedagogy in the 20th century. They are essential in the development of a democratic society (Benson and Voller, 1997; after Pawlak, 2006). Autonomy in foreign language learning appeared in the 1960s and 1970s while in 1971 the Council of Europe established the Modern Languages Project and founded the Foreign Languages Didactic Centre (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France specializing in systems of learning in autonomy. Autonomy in language learning has its roots in the radical proposals for the reform of the educational system suggested by Dewey, Kilpatrick, Freire, Illich and Roger (Pawlak, 2006), which stressed the role of the student in the process of learning everything. Moreover, views on the psychology of learning were changing, promoting auto regulation (students are able to develop abilities of effective learning) and self-organisation (this is the ability to reflect on one's educational experience) in the learning process – constructivism.

In the communicative approach to the learning process the stress has been shifted from the methods of teaching to the methods of learning. Also, in the era of globalisation and global communication, the number of foreign language learners has grown rapidly and people learn English for such varied reasons and purposes that institutions are not able to fulfil the educational needs of every learner. Consequently, it has become vital to create and shape autonomous learning attitudes and behaviour.

The theories linking autonomy with peer feedback are those of Bound (1988), who has defined features and behaviour characteristics of an autonomous student. Bound suggests that an autonomous student undertakes initiative in the areas which require cooperation with other group members and being responsible for their development as well as considering a teacher to be an advisor is what brings autonomy close to peer feedback.

2. The shift in the role of the teacher

Traditionally in the twentieth-century system of education as equally earlier the role of a teacher was perceived as that of a person who takes full control of the students' learning process, somebody who is a supervisor of the classroom and the group of students and who has the only right to decide about the content of the lesson, the choice of the textbook, the choice of the teaching methods (traditional ones). This situation may still be observed in the school environment (Polish schools) where a teacher is "the boss" for the students or pupils. Such type of the teacher uses a specific coursebook as the basis for the lessons and has full control of the learning process. Educational programmes have long been written and prepared in such a way as to give the teacher supervision over the students. Furthermore, the form of exams prevailing at

present is tests, which do not necessarily give either the teacher or the student the possibility of developing any form of autonomy. Finally, there exist other restrictions, such as for instance, institutional ones, which discourage teachers from promoting autonomous behaviour. Educational authorities are not in favour of the initial commotion and anarchy in the classroom which heads for autonomy. Also parents, not only of primary school children but also of secondary school students who are very often in the process of growing up and who are suspicious of any forms of innovation and believe that it is the duty of the teacher to be responsible for the learning process: for its effects as well as for the success of their children. Because of this, students themselves may be against their own autonomy in the learning process and very often do not understand why they have to make independent decisions. They may even fear being independent and, thus, may have a low self-esteem.

2.1. Teacher's approach

However, nowadays the role of the teacher is slowly and gradually changing and teachers themselves see the necessity for this change. Due to the fact that autonomy is a kind of psychological state (Pawlak, 2006), it can be taught by a teacher only through making students aware and willing to be more independent. Some specialists such as Dickinson (1993) and Wilczyńska (1999) talk about "half-autonomy," in which students take actions which prepare them for autonomous learning. Here, the approach of the teacher is crucial and helpful for the students.

What seems to be very important in the development of the autonomous student is the teacher's approach to assessment. It is essential for the teacher to stop the habit of picking up on (or pointing out) only the faults, mistakes and inefficiencies/inadequacies when checking or controlling students written or oral work. It is important to notice and appreciate those student abilities which have developed, to appreciate the development of skills. The deficits which appear in the course of learning and which are traced should be used for better preparation and planning of the further language learning process. Such planning can be used in the development of student self-assessment (Pawlak, 2006). At this point the role of the teacher is shifted again, now the students themselves are aware of the necessity of self-assessment and can gain the knowledge as to how to do it. The modern approach to studying and testing suggested by the European Council and methodology and didactic specialists (Komorowska, 2002: 155) states that self-assessment can serve as the supplementation of the vision of student knowledge and abilities. A modern teacher is advised to (Komorowska, 2002) lead the process of assessment parallel to the process of learning, not at the end of the given stage of education. Such teacher should stress students' abilities and progress, not their weaknesses and mistakes. A teacher should also provide the student with useful information about the ways of further learning in the future. This approach is called "alternative assessment."

The classroom research I lead focuses on the attempt to check if it is possible to develop student autonomy through peer feedback given after oral presentations

received by means of comments and assessment carried out through the Pegaz platform. This is my research question.

Before the classroom research I assumed that students can feel motivated by the fact that they would be assessed by their peers, not the teacher, that they would try to give their classmates positive feedback, focusing rather on their classmates' attempts, abilities rather than the mistakes and inadequacies of their presentations (what is good enough and what must be improved). The research was to check if my assumptions were correct.

3. Stages and procedures

To answer this question the research was conducted in two phases.

Phase I

Phase I took place at the beginning of the winter semester of 2012/13 in an EFL class of 20 B2 level students (21–22 years old) doing their third semester of English as a foreign language course at the university. At the end of the course each student is required, as a part of the final exam, to deliver a 15–20 minute speech in English focusing on their degree specialization. To prepare for this final presentation the students are asked to deliver a few (usually two or three) shorter (5 to 10 minute) speeches. Firstly, to prepare for this task, the students were shown sample presentations, were pre-taught specialist presentation vocabulary and listened to an interview on "How to deliver formal talks such as presentations, lectures" (Language Leader Upper Intermediate course book, p. 14). This theoretical part was followed by a practical phase, in which students were asked to give two presentations while being assessed by their peers on the basis of a questionnaire. The assessment process took place on the Pegaz platform where students posted their comments about each presentation and where they could use the forum to talk about the presentations and the speakers. The comments were then gathered and read by me. The students were to focus on a series of problems such as:
1. understanding the presentation itself,
2. body language and the speaker's posture,
3. eye-contact with the audience,
4. target audience,
5. reasonable pace of speaking,
6. technique of explaining complicated terms,
7. being nervous,
8. pronunciation and grammar.

All the problems were included in the questionnaire which students were asked to fill in when their peers were speaking. The follow up was a group discussion

about the speech and the speaker and the assessment of the speech. Here is the example of a questionnaire for the audience (questionnaire 1 in the appendix).

Phase II

Phase II took place in the middle of the spring semester 2012/13 before the final exam speech. Students took part in the mock exam delivering their speech in the version they had prepared for the final exam. Again this time a similar assessment procedure took place and the group discussed the students' speeches, giving their feedback. Additionally, each student was asked to fill in a questionnaire on self-assessment in relation to the possible progress made and the general feeling and opinion about the classroom research, receiving feedback and the possible autonomy gained by each student during this classroom research. The self-assessment comments were included in the form of the following questionnaire (questionnaire 2 in the appendix).

4. Data collection and analysis

The data sources were the questionnaires of peer feedback on students' presentations, the students' comments posted on Pegaz as well as the questionnaire for the presentation-givers (speakers) concerning the influence of peer feedback on achieving correctness in presentations, speakers' feelings about being assessed by classmates, as well as speakers' opinions about peer feedback and autonomy.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS OF THE CLASSROOM RESEARCH

Analysis of Phase I

Analysis of the first questionnaire enabled me to gain access to students' comments taken while listening to their peers' presentations. Students were able to precisely assess the speakers and point out the faults as well as the advantages of their presentations. They could judge whether a speaker was nervous and describe particular aspects of their nervousness, extensive use of unwelcome body language or gesture such as: touching their hair and face, adjusting their clothes, waving their hands in front of their body. Positive aspects were also noticed such as:
- Standing in the upright position.
- Keeping eye-contact with the audience and smiling.
- Making a general good impression.

Students were in favour of a standing position rather than a sitting position while giving presentations. The observers did not feel ashamed or shy to comment on and assess the others' work and gave their opinion openly and honestly. The same refers to discussing the content, technical form and understanding of the presentation itself. Students praised interesting and stimulating introductions containing

such elements as: introducing oneself, giving a brief account of one's specialization and the topic of presentation, giving and discussing a presentation plan and then developing each point gradually in the course of talking.

Summing up, all students enjoyed the part of assessing other speakers, and tried to do their job professionally and competently.

Analysis of Phase II

On the other hand, being assessed and analysed was a totally different situation. When filling in the final questionnaires at the end of the classroom research students gave opinions about how they felt receiving peer feedback in public or receiving peer feedback in comparison to a teacher's feedback and how peer feedback could influence the development of their autonomy in learning English.

The results of this analysis can be presented in the form of the following charts showing exactly how many students gave specific answers to the questionnaire questions.

Chart one – How do you feel when your classmates comment on your work in public?

Chart two – How do you think the classmates' comments about your oral presentation should be expressed?

Chart three – Would you like your oral presentation to be filmed for educational purposes?

Chart four – Do you think peer feedback in class can help to develop your autonomy in language learning?

I would like to present some of the answers:
- If peer feedback is good enough and professional and fair it can be useful.
- Maybe students can see more than a teacher who has seen many presentations and could have got into a routine.
- It can help to a small extend.
- No, because I do not trust my peers to be correct on matters of grammar.
- Possibly peer feedback could make me want to learn more and provide a variety of comments.
- Yes, definitely it can develop self-confidence.
- There should be more cooperation than evaluating the peers, due to the fact that students can be stressed when their friends point out their mistakes, peer feedback can cause a barrier in a group – becoming a social issue.

To sum up, the classroom research proved to some extend that for some students with a suitably open character and personality experiencing peer feedback can help to develop autonomy in learning a language and mastering oral presentation

skills. 40% of students (as shown in the diagram) felt motivated when receiving peer feedback, they were willing to accept their peers' comments and use them, introduce and incorporate them into their speeches in future.

How do you feel when your classmates comment on your work in public?
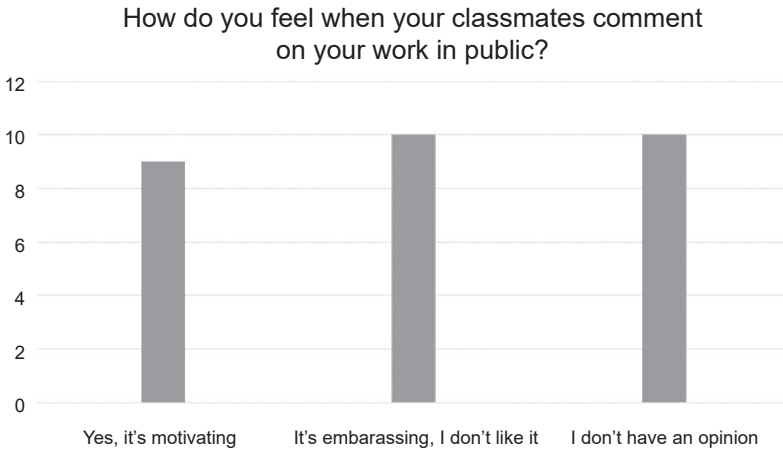
30% of students were definitely against receiving peer feedback of any kind, they seemed to be too ashamed to listen to any assessment being given in front of the whole class or even in a small group. This group of students would only accept face-to-face comments or those given to them in a written form. Still, 20% of them would be willing to listen to their colleagues' assessment and profit from it. However, 20% of students were generally against the very idea of peer feedback being introduced in the learning process. They were only able to accept a teacher's assessment: "only a teacher can show us the way to learn," "I don't trust my peers, I don't trust them to be correct in matters of grammar."

How do you think the classmates' comments about your oral preformance should be expressed?
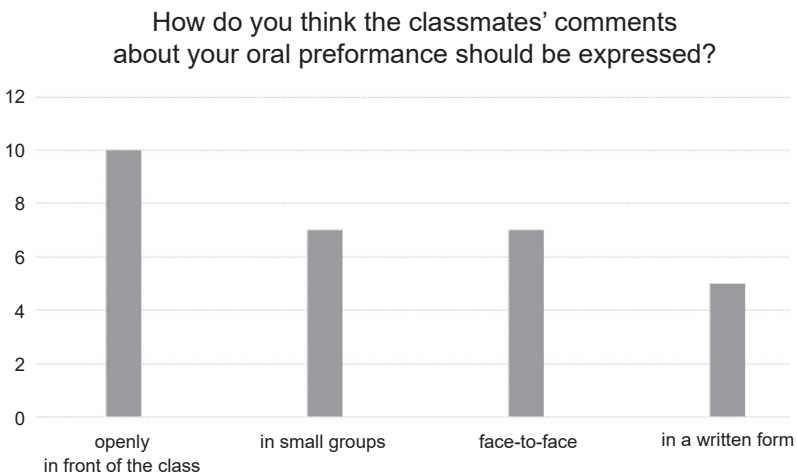
Such an approach apparently seems to be the traditional lecture-based learning method, they tend to perceive the role of the teacher as the main source of information/knowledge and the only person who has the right to assess, test and correct students. According to Pawlak (2006) these students lack the ability of self-directing and the lack of autonomy which is probably, as Pawlak suggests, the consequence of their earlier educational experience, lacking in the ability of their teacher to develop their autonomous behaviour. Students have to be taught how to take control and be responsible for their learning process.

Consequently, as autonomy is some kind of a psychological state (Pawlak, 2006), it can be taught only through making students aware and willing to be more independent. Some specialists such as Dickinson (1993) and Wilczyńska (1999) talk about "half-autonomy," in which students take actions which prepare them for autonomous learning.

Learning to be autonomous and developing autonomy is a very complex process, as some students have (which my action research showed) a negative attitude to taking control of their learning process, they may be afraid to make decisions independently or else they may have low self-esteem. It is crucial that very often teachers prefer to base their work on a specific course book and have full control over the process of studying rather than to give their students the possibility of choice and the possibility of making their own decisions about their learning. An autonomous student seems to be more demanding and he/she requires a teacher's constant development, looking for new techniques and materials to suit the students' expectations. Thus, the question which I asked at the beginning of my research seems to have a positive answer under the condition that there is a specific and suitable learning environment and students are willing to be or just to try to be independent and take responsibility for their learning and the learning of their peers.

I have proved in my research that a teacher should take actions to show their students the way to develop autonomy in learning and that this is a worthwhile procedure. What seems to prove the above is the percentage of students (40%) who responded positively to my proposal of taking part in such research, and who were willing and open enough to both give and accept peer feedback and learn from it, which contributed to the development of their autonomy and conviction that it was the right and appropriate way of doing it.

Bibliography

Atay, D. & Kurt, G. (2006). Prospective Teachers and L2 Writing Anxiety. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(4), 100–108.

Benson, P. (1997). The philosophy and politics of learning autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 18–34). London and New York: Longman.

Benson, P. & Voller, P. (1997). Introduction: Autonomy and Independence in language learning. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 1–17). London and New York: Longman.

Bound, D. (1988). *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*. New York: Kogan Press.

Dam, L. (1995). *Autonomy from Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentic.

Dickinson, L. (1993). Talking shop: Aspects of autonomous learning. *ELT Journal*, 47, 330–336.

Komorowska, H. (2002). *Sprawdzanie umiejętności w nauce języka obcego. Kontrola – Ocena – Testowanie.* Warszawa: Fraszka Edukacyjna.

Lin, G.H.C. & Chien, P.S.C. (2009). An Investigation into Effectiveness of Peer Feedback. *Journal of Applied Foreign Languages Fortunate Institute of Technology*, Taiwan, 3, 79–87.

McDonald, B. & Boud, D. (2003). The impact of self-assessment on achievement. The effects of self-assessment training on performance in external examinations. *Assessment in Education*, 10, 209–220.

Orsmond, P., Merry, S. & Reiling, K. (2000). The use of student derived marking criteria in peer and self-assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25, 23–38.

Pawlak, M. (2006). *Jak samodzielnie poznawać języki i kultury. Przewodnik metodyczny do europejskiego portfolio językowego dla uczniów ponadgimnazjalnych i studentów*. Warszawa: Centralny Ośrodek Doskonalenia Nauczycieli.

Sadler, D.R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructural systems. *Instructural Science*, 18, 119–144.

Schwienhorst, K. (2008). *Learner Autonomy and CALL Environments*. New York: Routledge.

Wilczyńska, W. (1999). *Uczyć się być nauczanym. O autonomii w przyswajaniu języka obcego*. Warszawa: PWN.

Wilczyńska, W. & Michońska-Stadnik, A. (2010). *Metodologia badań w glottodydaktyce. Wprowadzenie*. Kraków: Avalon.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire 1:

  3.1. ORAL PRESENTATIONS QUESTIONNAIRE

TOPIC: _____

1. Did you understand the presentation? (circle your answer)
2. Everything / most of it / only some parts / nothing.
3. Was it interesting for you? Why?
4. What was the speaker's posture and body language like?
5. Nervousness? Comment on it.
6. Maintaining eye-contact with the audience? Yes/no?
7. Pronunciation and grammar?
8. Pace of speaking: too slow / good tempo / too fast / difficult to understand.
9. How were the difficult terms explained?
10. Your mark for the speech from 1–10 and comment on it.

Questionnaire 2:

  QUESTIONNAIRE – PEER FEEDBACK IN ORAL PRESENTATION
  CLASSES

1. How do you feel when your classmates comment on your work? Circle the correct answer

          a) it's motivating   b) it's embarrassing, I don't like it   c) I don't have an opinion

2. Would you yourself give your feedback about your classmates' oral presentation?

          a) yes, willingly   b) no, definitely not   c) I don't know

3. How do you think classmates' comments about your oral performance should be expressed:

  a) Openly in front of the whole class
  b) In small groups when hot everybody hears the comments
  c) In a face-to-face interaction, your classmate speaks only and directly to you

d) In a written form, written comments being handed in only to you

e) Other, please stipulate . . . .

4. Would you like your oral presentation to be filmed/recorded for educational purposes/to be evaluated and assessed by your peers?

a) yes, it could be interesting to see myself talking, see how I behave, what body language I use

b) yes, but only to be shown and watched in my class

c) yes, but I don't want my classmates to watch the recording

d) yes, but only for the teacher to watch and comment on

e) no, I don't like to be filmed

f) definitely no

5. Would you take your classmates' comments about your oral performance seriously? Would you learn from them and be willing to make the suggested changes?

a) yes   b) no   c) other, please stipulate . . . .

6. How do you understand the term "peer feedback?"

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

7. How do you understand the term "student's/learner's autonomy?"

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

8. Do you think that peer feedback in class can help to develop your autonomy in language learning? (the teacher is only a guide) How?

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

9. What is learner autonomy to you?

a) it's the ability to be responsible for one's own learning

b) it's a matter of the learner's psychology and his/her attitude to learning

c) it's the recognition of the rights of the learner within an educational system

d) it needs peer support and cooperation to develop

e) other, please stipulate . . . .

10. Do you think learner autonomy can be developed through peers assessing your oral presentations?

a) yes, why?. . . . .
. . . .
. . . .

b) no, why? . . . .
. . . .
. . . .

Thank you for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire.