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DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS' LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH PROJECT WORK

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РОЗВИТОК НАВЧАЛЬНОЇ АВТОНОМІЇ УЧНІВ ЧЕРЕЗ ПРОЄКТНУ РОБОТУ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

The article describes the methodology of action research of secondary school students' autonomous learning in the English classroom with the use of project work. The stages of the research and its methods are revealed; the analysis of the obtained results during the pre-test and post-test of the study is carried out.

Key words: learner autonomy, project work, classroom action research, EFL methods.

Анотація. У статті описано методіку дослідження автономної навчальної діяльності учнів закладу ЗСО на уроках англійської мови з використанням проєктної роботи. Розкрито хід дослідження, застосовані методи, здійснено аналіз отриманих результатів під час констатувального та формувального етапів дослідження.

Ключові слова: навчальна автономія, проєктна робота, дослідження діяльності у класі, методи навчання англійської мови як іноземної.

Мета: розробити методіку розвитку навчальної автономії учнів засобом проєктної роботи англійською

мовою, обґрунтувати її ефективність.

General problem setting. During school experience, we have noticed that many students in English classes do not know how to work on their own and take charge of their learning. We can state that this is not the problem of one particular class or school. In the Ukrainian education system, a teacher-centered approach has prevailed up to now, which means an educator still plays a dominant role in the classroom. As a result, learners do not have many opportunities to be responsible for their own learning and to take an active part in the learning process. Therefore, there should be a solution to this issue. According to the State Standard of Complete General Secondary Education (*the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers № 898 of September 30, 2020*), the realization of the goal of basic secondary education should be based on the formation of a free personality of the student, support for his/her independence, responsibility, and initiative, the development of critical thinking and self-confidence. All these features are the fundamental characteristics of learner autonomy (LA).

For this study, which is a small-scale

action research, we have chosen project work as a tool. Over the past decade, most research on this topic has emphasized the idea that learners need to be able to take control over their own learning to be successful not just in class, but also to learn independently without a teacher outside the class (*Benson, 2011*). Because of distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, project-based learning, in our opinion, is a good option for developing LA, as it can be implemented beyond the classroom. During our school experience, we have observed and conducted lessons in Lyceum # 11 of the Ivano-Frankivsk City Council, Ukraine. The group in focus is the 8C grade that consists of 12 learners aged 13–14.

Analysis of researches and publications. In the last decades, there has been published an increasing amount of literature on fostering LA, as it is a widely known and problematic topic. Many researchers and methodologists (*Little, 2007; Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011; Gardner, 2011, etc.*) have studied it in order to present their own view on this issue because LA is a key element in the learning process of EFL that enables students to perform in a more ef-

fective way. The term "learner autonomy" does not have a fixed definition because each researcher determines it in his/her own way, paying attention to a particular context. However, the statement of Holec (1981), who believed that LA is the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning, became fundamental. According to this definition, Nguyen (2014) points out that LA is not the process, but a learner's attribute. The author underlines that this attribute is not inborn; it can be acquired only through a systematic and purposeful learning. The researcher also claims that learners' ability to be in charge of their learning is related to becoming responsible for the decision-making in all the aspects of the learning process. In his article, Moore (2015) draws our attention to the benefits of LA. First, learners can easily identify their learning goals and the way(s) in which they will reach them. Secondly, students apply a wide variety of learning approaches, techniques, and skills and organize their learning without difficulties. Lastly, they process the information well and can critically evaluate their learning. What is also significant is that LA in the learning process helps to expand this trait in everyday life too and, as a result, fosters a responsible, autonomous person. Many scientific articles in the field of LA explore different aspects of the concept. For example, some suggest general tips; others highlight principles, and the others focus on a certain level of students or the use of a certain tool, etc. For instance, Dam (*Little et. al., 2003, 135–146*) identifies the types of responsibilities that might be expected of the teacher and suggests ways for supporting pedagogues to change their traditional role towards a learning-centred environment.

In this study, we target at developing 8C Grade students' LA through project work. The main goal of the latter is "to provide opportunities for language learners to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output" (*Beckett & Miller, 2006, 4*). This implies that students are encouraged to perceive English as a tool for comprehension and interpretation in a foreign language context. According to M.I. Diaz Ramirez (2014, 56), "project

work fosters active roles for students in which the learners can engage in authentic and interesting tasks to achieve a common goal by means of collaborative work and the teacher provides them with opportunities to improve language skills for communicating successfully".

Outline of the main research material. The purpose of the current study was to work out the methodology for developing LA in secondary school learners through project work and explore its effectiveness. We formulated the research question of our action research as "*How to develop LA of 8th grade learners through project work?*" *This research question is supported by additional ones: Has the teacher created a learner-centered classroom where the students choose topics/tasks/partners, etc. and learn actively? Are the learners motivated in learning English? Are the students aware of their learning strategies (cognitive and metacognitive skills)? Out of that, in our study, we put forward a hypothesis: If we create opportunities for our 8th grade students to be responsible for their learning working on a project outside of the classroom, their LA will increase.*

Methodology. The study took place over four weeks and was split into five stages to allow for time for reflection and to make any changes necessary. The purpose of the first stage was to discover the problem of learners in Grade 8C. We had been observing the lessons of the target group of learners for five semesters and found out that they had a good level of English, regularly did their homework, and actively participated in lessons. On the other hand, the students were dependent on the teacher; they rarely made independent decisions about their learning, did not know how to work in groups, and did not like creative tasks. Based on the observations, we might assume that the 8th grade students lacked LA. To prove this assumption, we decided to collect data using the tool of guided lesson observation. During the second stage, we created a plan on how to develop LA of the target learners. First, we searched for relative literature on the general principles and methods of developing LA, but also based on the knowledge from our university course on methodology.

Secondly, to solve all the above issues of 8C grade learners, we decided to use project work as a tool. There were several reasons why to develop LA through project work by working in groups: (1) It gave an opportunity to improve the students' collaborative skills, as it is a significant part of becoming an autonomous learner (Blidi, 2017); also, collaborative skills are good preparation for real-life situations. (2) It helped to make the learners responsible for their decision-making (who the participants would be, what type and topic of the project would be, what resources would be used, how to distribute responsibilities among the group members, in what way to perform/how to present the results, etc.). (3) It became a great solution during the students' remote studies because of the quarantine. It was easier for the learners to do project work beyond the classroom, developing, at the same time, their skills in the use of ICT. During that stage, we also selected data collection tools, which we will describe and justify in detail in the next stage of the study. In the third stage, we worked on the implementation of our plan. Data collection followed the appropriate ethical procedures and received approval from the school administration. That was an evaluation study; a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools was used for measurement. The first data collection tool was a questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the level of LA, motivation, and students' attitude to project work. We chose that particular tool on account of the fact that it is one of the most rapid and practical ways to gather quantitative information from a large number of participants and to compare the received results using Google Forms. The second tool was interviews with two English teachers who taught eighth graders. To find out what opportunities the teachers created to engage the students in autonomous practices and what their attitude to project work was, they were interviewed individually. Such a tool was selected in order to determine how the teachers saw the situation in the classroom and what strategies they used to develop LA. The whole procedure lasted around 25 minutes. A script of the interviews can be

presented on demand. The third data collection tool was a sociogram. The purpose of the sociogram was to obtain information from the students about who they would most like to work with. That tool was chosen because, according to some authors, it is the best way to gain an insight into the social dynamics of the classroom and improve their opportunities for cognitive development (Heitzmann & Haley, 1974). The sociogram form and diagram can be presented on demand. After collecting data, we analyzed the findings, developed our own methodology, and made up an action plan. In *the fourth stage* of our action research, we prepared the learners for project work. First, we prepared a presentation to raise the students' awareness about different types of projects, their examples, the procedure of project work, and role distribution. With the help of the questionnaire and sociogram, we found out what projects students wanted to do and with whom they wanted to be in a group. The participants were divided into three groups of four. As the learners were studying a topic 'Travelling' in their English classes at that time, it was logical to give them a task to prepare a project on that topic within two weeks. The students were able to choose any specific focus or question they wanted to explore. The learners decided to prepare informative projects about English speaking countries, as follows: Group 1 chose USA; Group 2, United Kingdom; and Group 3, Australia. Since the project work was done outside the classroom, we monitored the process remotely (via Viber), and the students reported on the implementation of the project stages every four days. The groups worked together using modern technologies: Google Presentation for creating a project and Zoom for communication and sharing information. When the learners had some questions or faced problems, they tried to solve them on their own as a team and only if needed, asked us for help or advice. When the projects were ready, the group members presented their works, and we evaluated them against the discussed criteria. After the practical part of our action research, we used a student focus group as a post-test to check the effectiveness of our metho-

dology. We chose that particular tool because it was a good way to collect qualitative data and receive feedback. The whole procedure lasted around 20 minutes. In the final stage of the research, we reflected on the results of the action research and identified its positive or negative effect, and shared the strategies.

Findings and interpretations. The report and discussion of the main findings is organised around the three main research questions (see above), which will be discussed due to the order of the stages in the study. According to the first stage of the action research, we conducted lesson observation. We looked at the following areas of the English classroom: *Learner- or Teacher-centered classroom, Learner in focus and Teacher in focus*. From the first part of observation, we found out that out of thirteen responsibilities the teacher shared only three with her learners. From the second part of observation, we learned about the students' attitudes to English as a subject and their ways of learning. Namely, most of the learners feel good about learning English, listen attentively to the teacher and their peers, often ask questions, and demonstrate a tendency to learning from the teacher's corrections of mistakes. On the contrary, less than half of the learners volunteer to answer during the lessons; none of them enjoys working in pairs or groups and asks for clarification about the teacher's instructions. Moreover, they do not see homework as a significant part of the learning process. In the third part of the observation, we looked at how the teacher creates opportunities to foster LA in and outside of the classroom. The findings indicate that the educator teaches students to use aids to learning such as dictionaries and grammar books. She sometimes practices peer-assessment and self-assessment and uses online videos to encourage learners to study beyond the classroom. However, the teacher neither explains the purpose and usefulness of a task nor makes it challenging or gives learners responsibility by using small-group activities (only individual and pair work). In addition, the teacher does not involve learners in decision making, offer them choices or encourage reflecting on their own learning. From the data

gained, we can conclude that in this particular class a teacher-centered approach prevails. In addition, Teacher Talking Time is equal to Learner Talking Time (50 to 50%), which gives one more evidence that the teacher is almost the center of the learning process. The data shows that the 8th grade students are motivated, which is significant for becoming autonomous learners. On the other hand, less than half of the learners volunteer to answer during English lessons because they are afraid of making mistakes. It is clear now that the students work better individually but not in pairs or groups. One possible reason for this could be that during distance learning it is easier to work on your own, while organising pair or group work is more time consuming. The teacher uses learners' favourite online materials in order to encourage them to study beyond the classroom, but not very often. We find it useful that the teacher tries to develop students' ICT skills as it creates more possibilities for practising LA, e.g. finding information, doing online activities, collaborating with peers, communicating with the teacher, etc. On the other hand, not involving learners in decision making and not giving them choices proves that the students' abilities to influence their learning is limited. Therefore, we could draw a conclusion that the teacher had not created enough opportunities to foster LA in and outside of the classroom. According to the third stage of the action research, we created and conducted a questionnaire, which consists of three sections: *Learners' preferences, Learner Motivation and Learner Autonomy*. The first question (out of five) of the Learners' preference section was asked to find out what activities learners liked doing the most. According to the answers, nine learners (75%) chose *watching videos*, eight learners (66,7%) preferred *discussions*, seven learners (58,3%) liked making *dialogues*, one student chose doing *grammar exercises*, and half of the students (50%) enjoyed doing projects. The latter fact ensured us that six out of twelve students could be kinesthetic learners and project work would be beneficial for them. The second question was asked to get to know what interaction pattern the 8th grade learners preferred. The

answers showed that half of the students (50%) preferred working *with a partner*, while five learners (41,7%) – working *on their own*. Only one learner (8,3%) answered that he/she learns best working in a group (*see Table*). We assume that such responses were obtained because the students do not have enough opportunities to work in groups during distance learning. For more evidence of this assumption, see interpretation of the findings from *the interviews* that come in this section later. From this fact, we can conclude that students do not practice all types of interaction in EFL classes; therefore, project work can be helpful. The third question was aimed at finding the amount of time learners spent on doing their homework. As a result, nine learners (75%) did their homework *from 30 to 60 minutes* and three students (25%) devoted to homework *less than 30 minutes*. Out of these facts, we believe that the students will have enough time to do projects outside the classroom, which provides even more opportunities for developing LA, e.g.

distribute roles, find and analyze information, create a project together in real time using Google Presentation, etc. The students' answers to the fourth question "How often do you do English projects?" proved to be controversial, as five learners (41,7%) did projects *every 2–3 months*, four (33,3%) – once a semester; two – once a month, and one learner – once a year. The discrepancy in answers can be explained simply: the students misunderstood, were unaware of, or even mistaught what the project work is. The dare conclusion of ours is supported by their teachers' answers (*see below*). That is why, before giving the task to 8th grade students to complete projects, we introduced to students the types of projects, as suggested by Kotkovets (2014), their structure and evaluation criteria. In order to learn what type(s) of projects learners would like to do, the fifth question was asked. As a result, seven participants (58,3%) would like to do *Information and Research projects*, six of them (50%) – *Creative*, five (41,7%) – *Role and Game* and two

(16,7%) – *Practice-oriented* ones. Thus, most of the learners would like to try Information and Research and Creative projects; however, when choosing the type of project, all group members opted the Information and Research Projects. The *Learner Motivation* section of the questionnaire consists of six statements. The first item revealed the learners' attitude to English, as follows: nine students (75%) stated that they *love learning English*; three learners (25%) were *neutral*; nobody *disagreed*. Another item was designed to analyze *the importance of learning English for future job*. According to the results, six students (50%) *disagreed* with the statement, four learners (33,3%) stayed *neutral* and only two participants (16,7%) – *agreed*. The results of the next item showed that ten learners (83,3%) study English *to become a knowledgeable person*, one student reacted *neutrally* and the other *disagreed*. In the fourth item, almost all the students (91,7%) *disagreed* that they study English to avoid punishment; however, one

Table

The results of the implemented method

Questions	Pre-test*		Post-test**	
	Number	%	Number	%
1. Do you prefer to work:				
• Individually?	5	41,7	2	16,7
• In pairs?	6	50	4	33,3
• In groups?	1	8,3	5	41,7
2. What is your attitude to project work?				
• I like it.	6	50	9	75
• I feel neutral about it.	-	-	3	25
3. How do you deal with a problem while doing a task?				
• Try to find the answer myself, but could ask <u>my peers</u> for help.	-	-	6	50
• Try to cope with the problem by myself, but if I fail, ask <u>my teacher</u> for help.	-	-	3	25
• Try to find the answer myself, but often ask someone for help.	6	50	-	-
• Solve the problem on my own.	0	0	3	25
• Immediately ask my teacher or classmate(s) for help.	6	50	0	0

*based on the findings from the questionnaire

**based on the findings from the focus group

learner reacted neutral. From the next item, we found out that most of the participants (66,7%) *immediately ask the teacher for help if they have some problems*. The other four learners divided their votes equally among the other options. The next item found out that half of the students *volunteer to answer as much as possible* during the lesson, the others – *answer only when they are asked*. Thus, the findings from this section of the questionnaire make it possible to conclude that the students have a sufficient level of learning motivation. The last section of the questionnaire, *Learner Autonomy*, includes four statements. According to the chosen options from the first item (*When I have a problem understanding something in an English class, I...*), half of the learners *immediately ask the teacher or classmate(s) for help*, while the other half – *try to find the answer themselves, but often ask for help too*. The second item was designed to analyze what activities the students do autonomously beyond the classroom in order to develop LA. The results are as follows: most of the students learned English by *listening to songs* (83,3%), *watching videos* (67,8%) and only two learners (16,7%) had an opportunity to practise English with friends, classmates, and/or foreigners. According to the results from the third item we got to know whether the students had developed their metacognitive skills: out of twelve learners, only one (8,3%) is *not aware of the strategies that help him/her to learn*. The fourth statement in the questionnaire was designed to find out if the learners had developed their cognitive skills. Again, only one (8,3%) is *not aware of the strategies that help him/her improve English*. Due to these findings, we can conclude that most of the learners (91,7%) have good cognitive and metacognitive skills, that means they know what strategies will be helpful during their project work. On the contrary, if the students have a problem with understanding something, most of them immediately seek help from the teacher (see Table). This proves that students do not even try to find a solution to their problem on their own, because they know that the teacher will provide a quick and correct answer immediately.

This fact was taken into account during the organization of project work and the teacher involvement was minimized. Thus, while completing the task, students relied only on themselves and their peers, which allowed them to improve their collaborative skills. During the third stage of our action research, we also used an interview as a tool. We interviewed two English teachers, individually via Zoom (the script of the interview can be presented on demand). The interview contained five main questions, as follows: *"What opportunities do you create to engage your students in autonomous practices?"*; *"How often do your students do projects?"*; *"Which types of projects do you ask your students to do? (Information and Research; Creative; Role and Game; Practice-oriented projects)"*; *"Which of them do your learners prefer doing or would like to try?"*; *"How do your learners prefer doing projects? (Individually, in pairs, in groups)"*. The interview with the teachers revealed that they understand the importance of developing LA and try to *"create opportunities to engage their students in autonomous practices"*, e.g. increase motivation, create friendly environment in the classroom, provide and receive feedback and raise awareness of learning strategies. One of the teachers said, *"I usually give my learners feedback on their performance ... But due to the remote learning, now I don't have enough time to do it every lesson"*. In such a situation it would be great to give the learners delayed feedback via a text messenger as it does not take time during the lesson and is ethical because the information remains private. Unfortunately, the teachers do not give their learners choice or it is rather limited, e.g.: Teacher 2 gave the following example: *"... their home task is to write an application letter, and they can choose from two job adverts (out of the coursebook) the one they like more."* The instructions to this task could be changed, e.g. search for a job advert on the Internet and write an application letter based on it. Then, this task would be without any limitations, fostering LA. In addition, the teachers said that they did projects *"very rarely, once a semester or even once a year..."*. From this,

we can conclude that the teachers do not see an opportunity to do project work outside the classroom, although it is a great chance to save time and develop ICT skills, as the work itself is done online. Teacher 1 stated, *"I thought we had done Information projects before. But now when you have described in detail to the students the types of projects... I can say it was a simplified interpretation..."*. Out of this, we might conclude that another reason why project work is so rare in the eighth grade is that teachers themselves do not fully understand its types and structures. Teacher 2's answer, *"As we do projects only in class, usually it is in groups of four or five... However, we don't do them at all now..."* highlights that during distance learning, teachers have decreased the amount of time allocated to students for group work by 65%. This is evidenced by the results of the study conducted by the EdWeek Research Center (Herold, 2021). The next tool of data collection was a sociogram. In order to complete it, the 8th grade learners were asked three questions: *"If you have a question about an English task/homework, which of your classmates do you ask for help?"*, *"Who do you think the leaders in your class are?"* and *"If you were to work on a project with three classmates, whom would you choose?"* With the help of students' answers, we found out that the 8th grade students had formed friendly relations within the class and their choice of participants for project work in most cases was mutual. Based on that we divided students into three groups of four for project work. As a result, Group 1 was made up of Student 3, Student 7, Student 11 and Student 12; Group 2 – Student 1, Student 5, Student 9 and Student 10; Group 3 – Student 2, Student 4, Student 6 and Student 8. In such a way, we gave learners a choice, which is very important while developing LA. During the fourth stage (post-test), we used a student focus group as a data collection tool. The learners were asked three questions: *"Do you prefer more to work individually, in pairs or groups now?"*; *"How did your attitude to project work change?"*; *"How do you deal with a problem while doing a task now?"* Thus, based on the results from the stu-

dent focus group (*see Table*) we can draw the following conclusions: the majority of the 8th grade students (75%) have become more willing to be engaged in autonomous practices among which project work is; the number of learners who prefer to work collaboratively in small groups has increased considerably (by 33,3%); there is a considerable drop (by 50%) in the number of students who completely rely on the teacher while facing a problem; while the amount of the participants who solve their problems on their own has increased by 25%.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. Our work has led us to the conclusion that the 8th grade students tend to be in charge of their learning, i.e. making decisions relating to the group composition, topic and type of the project, roles distribution, content, sources and tools for selecting information, modes of presentation, etc., which is a significant proof of them becoming autonomous learners by means of project work. This result could be achieved only in the learner-centered classroom, where the students are motivated and aware of the strategies that make their learning successful. Our investigations into this area are still ongoing and seem likely to confirm our hypothesis. Thus, the results of the undertaken action research offer powerful evidence for the effectiveness of the designed method. The results of this study were first published at an international scientific conference in May, 2021 (*Romanyshyn & Romanyshyn, 2021*).

However, for the method to be implemented successfully in other learning contexts, the teacher in the first place should be autonomous her/himself. In addition, he/she has to create conditions for fostering LA of their students, such as: social and supportive learning environment, awareness of the learning process, choice, collaboration and sharing experience, peer-assessment, reflection on individual learning preferences and strategies. Also, the educator should offer their students activities in class that promote LA, lecture less gi-

ving them opportunities for exploring some part of the material by themselves outside of the classroom, i.e. to use the flipped classroom approach (*Han, 2015; Voss & Kostka, 2019*).

The area for further research will be the use of technology for enhancing LA during remote learning.

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