



Pedagogical Contexts 2019, No. 1(12)  
www.kontekstypedagogiczne.pl  
ISSN 2300-6471  
pp. 53–61  
DOI: 10.19265/KP.2019.11253



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Received: 18.02.2019  
Accepted: 8.03.2019

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## FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY: SELF-EVALUATION IN ENHANCING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS

### WSPIERANIE AUTONOMII UCZNIĄ: SAMOOCENA W DOSKONALENIU UMIEJĘTNOŚCI PISANIA W JĘZYKU ANGIELSKIM

**Keywords:**  
learners' autonomy,  
self-evaluation,  
English writing skills,  
autonomy upbringing

**Summary:** The article is dedicated to the problem of teaching learners to be responsible for their academic achievements. An independent and autonomous student is a peer partner of a teacher in the teaching and learning processes. The author suggests a self-evaluating technique which enables the learner to develop an attitude and gain experience with autonomy and investigates the role of autonomy in enhancing the English writing skills of students in Ukrainian secondary schools. The self-evaluating technique consists of three steps, with the first involving self-assessment of formal writing skills by the students themselves. The second step presupposes self-evaluating activity on enhancing English writing skills. The final step involves the self-evaluation of enhanced writing skills. According to the purpose and the outcomes of the research, the assessment-and-evaluation tasks gave students the opportunity to develop their learners' autonomy and independence. The participants

of the research were 4 teachers and 40 ninth-grade students from Ukrainian secondary schools.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

autonomia  
uczących się,  
samoocena,  
umiejętność pisania  
po angielsku,  
wychowanie  
autonomiczne

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł poświęcony jest problemowi nauczania uczniów odpowiedzialności za swoje osiągnięcia naukowe. Niezależny i autonomiczny uczeń jest równym partnerem nauczyciela w procesach nauczania i uczenia się. Autor artykułu proponuje technikę samooceny, która pozwala uczniowi rozwinąć samodzielność i zdobyć autonomię, oraz bada rolę autonomii w poprawie umiejętności pisania w języku angielskim wśród uczniów ukraińskich szkół średnich. Zaproponowana technika samooceny składa się z trzech etapów, z których pierwszy obejmuje samoocenę formalnych umiejętności pisania przez samych uczniów. Drugi krok zakłada samoocenę w zakresie doskonalenia umiejętności pisania po angielsku. Ostatni krok obejmuje samoocenę ulepszonych umiejętności pisania. Zgodnie z celem badań, zadania związane z samooceną dały uczniom możliwość rozwijania autonomii i niezależności. Uczestnikami badania było 4 nauczycieli i 40 uczniów dziewiątej klasy ukraińskich szkół średnich.

## Introduction

An independent learner is one who critically analyzes not only the learning information and tasks, but also the outcomes of his/her cognitive efforts. A student's autonomy depends much on the maturity of such character traits and abilities as relying on intrinsic motivation, accepting responsibility for one's academic achievements and reflective self-management in learning; success in learning strengthens the student's intrinsic motivation. Autonomy, according to Henri Holec, is not an innate quality but should be developed/learned in the process of personal development as well as through formal learning (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Therefore, the skill of monitoring and evaluating one's learning achievements is the necessary goal of certain teaching strategies which aim at creating the environment for fostering a learner's autonomy and promoting autonomous and independent learning activity. Overall, learning autonomy is a multicomponential phenomenon; as suggested by Tassinari, it is

a meta-ability – “komplexe Metafähigkeit” (Tassinari, 2012, p. 13). Its evident manifestation is expressed by a competence, a skill and an act which can be implemented and shown by a learner in certain learning contexts and situations.

## Literature overview

The teaching and development of autonomy in language learning demands the involvement of several types of activities which are grounded on a number of fundamental principles: learner involvement, learner reflection, target language use (Little, 2007). Such activities include the following: teacher activity necessary for sharing with a learner the responsibility for his/her academic outcomes; mutual learner and teacher activity aimed at monitoring and evaluating the learning process; teacher participation (providing) and learner participation (using) communication in the target language. Terry Lamb emphasizes that learner autonomy seems to be the product of the efforts of both the learner and the teacher in order to learn something new, including from each other (Lamb, 2007, p. 269). Therefore, autonomy can't be viewed discretely as a separate activity of one participant of the learning process, but always as a common construct of a teacher's and learner's activities.

As a result of scientific modelling, meta-ability is seen as the unity of autonomy elements including competency and performance (Tassinari, 2010, p. 203). In the perspective of such understanding, the responsibility for a learner's autonomy belongs to both the teacher and the learner (Nasonova, 2009). The teacher's role in this respect is to appropriately choose the teaching strategy, apply certain techniques, investigate and take into account the possible dynamics of the learning process (Mackey, 2006). In the process of foreign language learning, Ernesto Macaro defines specific autonomy components: autonomy of language competence, autonomy of language learning competence, autonomy of learner choice (Macaro, 2007).

## Objective and tasks

An autonomous language learner should possess a language competence specific for his/her linguistic personality, implying the ability to independently and appropriately use certain language learning strategies. Consequently, such skills can be developed with the help of teaching strategies. Thus, this study looked at fostering and developing learners' autonomy by means of

self-evaluation. *Research tasks*, accordingly, are the following: to test the efficacy of certain self-evaluating techniques and to define the influence of self-evaluation procedures on the process of the development of the students' writing skills.

## Method

In the given research, we have substantiated and implemented the tasks related to certain steps in evaluating activity during the formative stage of teaching English. According to Tassinari (2012, p. 17), these steps are: elicitation of attitudes and experiences with learner autonomy, the selection of components and descriptors for self-assessment; self-evaluation; feedback on self-evaluation; decisions for further learning. We aimed at reaching a particular level of learner's autonomy in accomplishing the learning tasks, which imply self-evaluating for enhancing English writing skills.

The participants of our research were four (4) teachers and 40 ninth-grade students from four Ukrainian secondary schools: 1) Technical Lyceum NTUU Kiev State Polytechnic (NTUU KPI); 2) Kyiv Specialized School No.102; 3) Lyceum of politics, economics, law and foreign languages of Kyiv; 4) Private Linguistic Gymnasium, Kyiv. The chosen teachers were females with more than 5 years of working experience. All teachers had international certification on the Cambridge English Teaching Framework (one or more of the following: TKT, CELT-S, CELTA, ICALT). They provided suggested tasks for their groups and collected data from the ninth-grade students. All students met criteria for A2+/B1 level. This convenience sample comprised Ukrainians only, including 24 boys and 16 girls. Participants with current A1 or B2 levels of English were excluded from participation.

## Results and discussion

In order to understand the students' needs, we used statistical data on how often teachers assessed different types of written tasks (Figure 1).

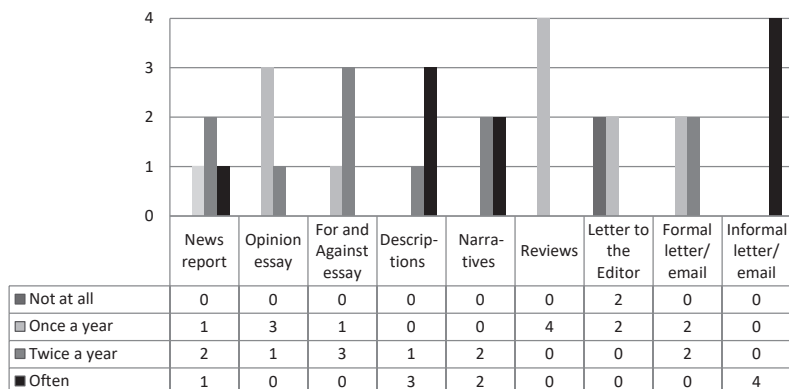


Figure 1.

Types of writing assignments teachers gave students in the 2017–2018 school year.  
Source: the author's own research.

As Figure 1 suggests, among this sample of teachers, informal letters/emails were the most commonly assigned writing tasks. Three of four teachers asked their students to write descriptions more than twice a year. Another prevalent type of composition was the narrative – all students practiced writing first-person narratives at least twice a year. Letters to the Editor – along with reviews and opinion essays – were not assigned by teachers on a frequent basis but were assigned at some point at least once during the school year by half of the teachers in our sample. Thus, the least practiced were those assignments which require the students' cognitive skills, particularly, the skill of being able to express a personal opinion, and therefore representing a motivation to develop writing skills.

The teachers' results were then compared with similar answers given by the students concerning their learning needs. To promote independence in the class, we asked each student to select the type of writing tasks they wanted to improve, including some details about their choice. Thus, according to the questionnaire, the students were most interested in writing a *For and against essay*, *Review*, *Opinion essay* and *Letter to the Editor* (33 out of 40 chose these types of writing tasks).

In our research, we limited the amount of tasks, leaving those where the mutual interest from both students and teachers exhibited the feeling of a strong necessity for improving learners' skills in writing.

Self-evaluating techniques comprised three steps: self-assessing formal writing skills by students (Handout 1); self-evaluating activity on enhancing

English writing skills (Handout 2); and self-evaluating the enhancement English writing skills (Handout 3). The examples of handouts are provided below.

*Step 1. Self-evaluating formal writing skills by students (Handout 1)*

What kind of writing do you want to improve?			
opinion essay	letter to the editor	review	formal letters
Why have you chosen this type of writing?			
I think it will be easy to learn.	I think it's a difficult type of writing.	I think I need more practicing.	I don't know.
What areas do you think you need to work on?			
Task completion	Coherence	Vocabulary	Grammar
Thinking of ideas.	Organizing ideas.	Using advanced vocabulary.	Becoming more accurate.
Style.	Paragraphing.	Using more idioms/ phrasal verbs.	Using a greater range of grammar.
Including all the information.	Structuring the writing.	Using a range of vocabulary (synonyms).	Using of the passive formal constructions.
Writing more (or less).	Guiding the reader.		
Writing fluently (quickly).			
Paraphrasing and summarizing.			

This task was useful both for students to determine their weaknesses and for teachers to consider each answer and category so as to help students develop their strengths.

*Step 2. Self-evaluating activity on enhancing English writing skills (Handout 2), created according to the model Assessing Language Learning Activity (Evans, 2017, p. 15).*

Define the activities which in your opinion will help enhance your skills in writing a review, an opinion essay and a letter to the editor: very significant, significant insignificant
1. Brainstorming for ideas for the selection of written tasks
2. Reading sample texts carefully and underlining the key words.
3. Editing the composition, correcting any spelling, punctuation, grammar errors.
4. Writing the composition in the correct style.
5. Joining ideas and various writing techniques to make your piece of writing interesting.
6. Plan the layout of the writing.
7. Using appropriate vocabulary, linking words/phrases.

At the pre-writing stage, the teachers took into consideration the results of the student's self-evaluation: a set of preparatory lessons were conducted, becoming the instrument of successful autonomy development. These were followed by the tasks of writing a Review, an Opinion essay, a Letter to the editor on the topics defined in some assignments while working in class (brainstorming, conversations in classroom).

*Step 3. Self-evaluating progress in enhancing English writing skills (Handout 3)*

Define which skills you have developed while accomplishing the written tasks: to describe, to clarify, to compare, to expand the text, to follow genre requirements;  
 Assess your work for the written assignments according to the following criteria: grammatical accuracy (max 3), meeting the requirements (max 3), abundance of TL vocabulary (max 3), coherence (max 3);  
 Define what items are difficult to be assessed (very difficult, difficult, not difficult): your writing skills, the level of interest-provoking quality of the task, the usefulness of a written activity suggested by the teacher;  
 Define which skills of structuring the text of certain formats (Review/ Opinion essay/ Letter to editor) do you lack most: introduction, conclusion, discourse markers, dividing into paragraphs, grammar accuracy.

Following Benson, we used the method of measuring autonomy abilities in the natural context of learning English through written performance (Benson, 2001). The results suggest that clear progress in the development of learner's autonomy was observed in the following activities:

1. Motivating in achieving a higher level of language competence.
2. Structuring the language knowledge.
3. Planning the process of writing.
4. Choosing materials and methods in language learning.
5. Performing.
6. Cooperating.
7. Managing one's own learning.

After the implementation of the 3 steps of self-evaluating techniques, we observed positive changes in overall written production, which further were compared with the criteria of officially accepted assessment grid for overall written production (CEFR, Structured overview, p. 23). The results have shown that 34 out of 40 students displayed an increase in the number of points for written skills, with the marks being in correspondence with those suggested by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine.

Teacher observation confirmed the increase in the development of the level of students' writing skills (Tab. 1).

Table 1  
*Observation of students' English writing skills (frequency out of 40)*

Writing skills	Pre-experimental stage	Post experimental stage
Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences	40	40
Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like "and", "but" and "because"	31	39
Can write discrete elements of text	37	40
Can write not structured text	36	40
Focus on the important information	27	39
Can write straightforward connected text	5	35
Can link a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.	3	39
Can vary the subjects related to the field of writing	6	34
Can evaluate information and arguments from a number of sources	7	37
Can expand and shorten text	12	34
Can write clear, well-structured text on complex subjects	3	31
Can express reasons and give relevant examples	8	30
Can write an appropriate conclusion	4	32
Can write complex text in an appropriate style	3	30

## Conclusion

Research results show that self-evaluating effectively serves as a tool for the development of all types of autonomy: autonomy of language competence, autonomy of language competence, autonomy of student choice. The proposed self-assessment technique helps students to analyse their own competencies and learning strategies. The self-evaluating technique has become an instrument for teachers to support students' independence.

The changes that have taken place in the general written production of students of Ukrainian secondary schools have shown that 85% of the students participating in the experiment wrote clear, smooth and logically structured texts, never previously written. We associate this fast learning with advanced autonomy skills. This can also prove the idea that students' "active participation in the learning process is not measured by the number of performed exercises and texts that are read (or written), but by the level of involving some cognitive



processes of the brain in learning a foreign language” (Morska, 2017), further stimulated by autonomous study.

When considering the links between self-evaluating in the learning process and the formation of an autonomous and independent language learner, areas which need further investigation include the clarification of components and descriptors of self-evaluation, the organization of various forms of feedback, the establishment of the influence of language learning autonomy on the students’ motivation for further education in other knowledge areas.

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