

Anna A. Stefanowicz-Kocol

University of Applied Sciences in Tarnow
Faculty of Humanities
Department of English Philology
a_stefanowicz@pwsztar.edu.pl

Original research paper

UDC: 371.3::811.11-057-87
DOI: 10.19090/MV.2023.14.121-142

Danijela D. Đorđević

University of Belgrade
Faculty of Agriculture
Institute of Field and Vegetable Crop Science
Cabinet of Foreign Languages
ddj@agrif.bg.ac.rs

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON STUDENTS' READINESS FOR AUTONOMY WITHIN THE ESP CONTEXT: THE CASE OF TWO COUNTRIES

ABSTRACT: The paper investigates students' readiness for autonomy within the context of learning ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at the tertiary level. Developing learner autonomy within the context of higher education is particularly relevant for students in view of pursuing their career goals in the future. The main objective of the study was to find out whether and to what extent students were ready to adopt autonomy within the learning process at the university level. The sample for this study consisted of a total of 79 respondents from Poland (University of Applied Sciences in Tarnow) and Serbia (University of Belgrade, Faculty of Agriculture). A purpose built questionnaire evaluating an aspect of readiness for autonomy was used to probe the participants. In general, students from both subsamples were inclined to place responsibility for their learning on the teacher. Suggestions on how to tackle different autonomy issues and how to broaden the current study are provided in the conclusions.

Key words: ESP, learner autonomy, readiness, tertiary educational level, Poland, Serbia.

EKSPLOATIVNO ISTRAŽIVANJE SPREMNOSTI STUDENATA ZA AUTONOMIJU U OKVIRU KONTEKSTA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE: SLUČAJ DVEJU ZEMALJA

APSTRAKT: Rad istražuje da li su studenti spremni za autonomiju u okviru učenja engleskog jezika struke na tercijarnom nivou obrazovanja. Razvijanje studentske autonomije u kontekstu visokog obrazovanja posebno je važno za studente radi ostvarivanja njihovih

ciljeva u budućoj karijeri. Glavni cilj ovog istraživanja bio je da se utvrdi da li su i u kojoj meri studenti spremni da usvoje autonomiju tokom procesa učenja na univerzitetskom nivou. Uzorak za ovo istraživanje obuhvatao je ukupno 79 ispitanika iz Poljske (Univerzitet primenjenih nauka u Tarnovu) i Srbije (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Poljoprivredni fakultet). Za ispitivanje učesnika korišćen je namenski napravljen upitnik kojim se ocenjuje aspekt spremnosti za autonomiju. Generalno uzevši, studenti iz oba poduzorka bili su skloni da odgovornost za svoje učenje prebace na nastavnika. Sugestije o tome kako se baviti različitim pitanjima u vezi sa autonomijom i kako proširiti ovo istraživanje date su u zaključku.

Ključne reči: engleski jezik struke, autonomija učenika, spremnost, tercijarni nivo obrazovanja, Poljska, Srbija.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a proliferation of research related to autonomy in the field of foreign language learning and numerous reference entries appear in the search for the collocation ‘learner autonomy’. Broadly speaking, learner autonomy refers to the ability of a student to take responsibility for their education (Holec 1981: 3; Benson 2001: 58). Although simple at first glance, the concept is rather intricate since it is related to the nature of the learner, with all the intricacy and changeability. Chik, Aoki & Smith (2018: 2) attempt to operationalise the complexity of the notion by listing the questions that should be raised when considering it: “Who is taking control? Taking (or retaking) this control from whom? What types of control? When do the learners exercise control? And in what places and spaces do learners take control?” These questions enlarge the scope of interest, but there are also other issues intertwined with the concept. Individual differences, motivation or learning styles are just a few examples of factors that heavily influence the degree of autonomous behaviour that students may exhibit.

Investigating the relationship of autonomy and motivation, Ushioda (2011) argues that giving learners the freedom to express themselves may be empowering, as they are able to manifest their own self and realise their goals and ambitions. In terms of language learning motivation, it means that the learners are able to use the language in an instrumental way, realising their potential to become someone they have always wanted to become. In fact, Stroet, Opendakker & Minnaert (2013), having analysed 71 studies probing the relationship between autonomy and motivation, note a significant positive correlation between autonomy-supportive teaching and students’ motivation to learn. However, the authors do not list the elements that contributed to the support of autonomy. What is more, they note that the need for support of autonomy is visible in studies probing students’ opinions rather than in ones investigating teachers’ views.

While autonomous behaviour can be observed across all learning styles, certain learning preferences are associated with more successful self-directed learning (Oladoke 2006). Having studied distance learners, Hisham (2004) argues that expanding the range of learning styles learners are comfortable with positively influences their performance and participation. Therefore, Yu (2020) recommends introducing learner training as a measure that will support learner autonomy.

It is almost impossible to study learner autonomy without taking into account the educational culture the learner has grown up in. Within this preliminary study, the authors aim to find out whether and to what extent students of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) coming from different cultural settings (Poland and Serbia) and studying different disciplines (nursing and agriculture), are ready for autonomous learning. Some researchers (e.g., Sinclair 2000) mention culture as an important factor that can have an impact on developing learner autonomy within different communities, as well as how autonomy and culture are related in different learning situations (Palfreyman & Smith 2003). In addition, Cirocki, Anam & Retnaningdyah (2019) hypothesise that developing learner autonomy will probably differ, depending on the country, as to the extent and type of support.

Besides, O'Leary (2007) notes that many questions arise on how to assess learner autonomy, or even whether it is possible. She points out that even though there are defined degrees of autonomy developed by Nunan (1997), they were developed to support learners in developing autonomous behaviours rather than to test the learners' level of independence. Since the learning environment largely influences the process of developing learner autonomy (Benson 2001), the same practices may have very different results depending on the circumstances. Benson (2001) also raises the point that autonomous behaviour should not be generated as part of a task. He warns that instigating a desirable form of behaviour merely checks if students are able to perform it. However, it does not provide information on whether they are comfortable exercising it on their own, without the teacher's instruction.

Another approach that may aid teachers in developing their learners' autonomous behaviours is attempting to evaluate the students' readiness for autonomy rather than check their level of independence. Sinclair (2009: 185) believes that "learner autonomy is a construct of capacity which is operationalised when willingness is present". This willingness determines the learners' involvement in promoting autonomous behaviours. A thorough evaluation of the learners' readiness for autonomy may guide the teacher in designing and implementing the curriculum (Lin & Reinders 2019).

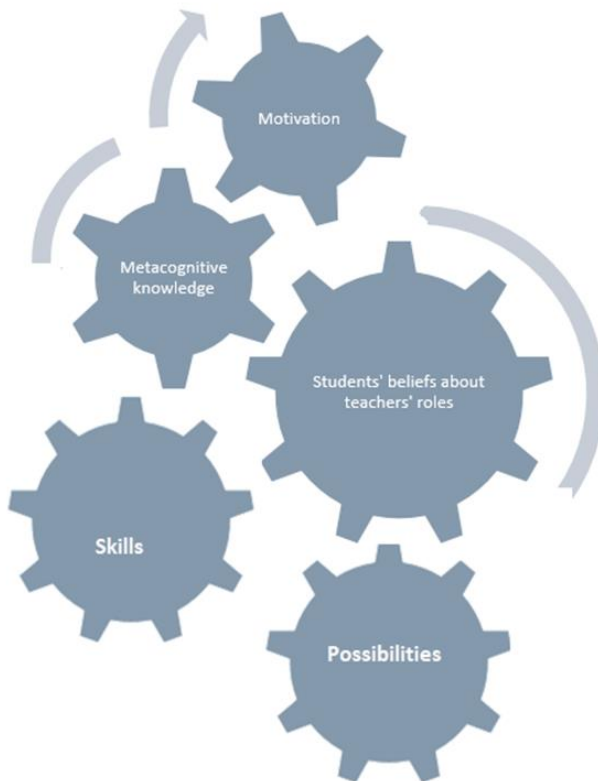


Figure 1. The concept of learner autonomy (image created by the authors)

As it is conceptualised in Figure 1, the authors see the different variables of the concept of learner autonomy as mutually interdependent, with each influencing the growth and importance of the others, but still being able to hinder the development of the concept. In accordance with Sinclair's (2009) and Ushioda's (2011) belief, motivation tops visualisation. It is closely followed by the knowledge and skills advocated e.g. by Nunan (1997) or Yu (2020). However, the current authors believe the greatest importance should be attached to the learners' beliefs about their roles and the teachers' roles in the learning process. These beliefs are closely connected with the educational culture Sinclair (2000) mentions, as they will have been established and regularly employed by learners in the earlier stages of their education. The last element of the concept is the learning context itself with the possibilities of exercising learner autonomy. Lamb (2011) points out that it is the range of choices that learners can make about the process of learning and how much

responsibility for the learning process they are allowed to take on that really decides about the learning environment being autonomy supportive.

Student autonomy is of vital importance for teachers. Therefore, it is understandable that knowing students' readiness for autonomy may help language instructors design courses that are appropriate for their learners (Yıldırım 2008; Chan 2001). To operationalise the concept, the study focuses on the assessment of students' readiness for autonomy from the point of view of their beliefs about their roles and the roles of the teacher in the language classroom. The next part of the paper attempts to reflect on ways of assessing and increasing students' readiness as well as the benefits of the process of evaluating autonomy. The third part describes the methodology used in this study. The fourth part deals with the results and discussion and the fifth part indicates concluding remarks and implications, as well as the limitations of this study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Challenges in assessing readiness for autonomy

Since the construct in question may be multidimensional and versatile, there are several issues proposed to date related to the assessment of learners' readiness for autonomy (Little 1991; Nunan 1997; Benson 2001). Little (1991) divides the problems into four groups: those related to learners, teachers, the learning process and learner training. The issues connected with the learners concern the age at which such assessment could be started, the stage of education, needs, the learning context and the influence of individual traits on their overall score. The learning process sets the challenge of formalising the development of learner autonomy, a process that by nature needs to be highly individualised and subjectively evaluated by every learner rather than overtly monitored by the teacher. It also brings out the complexity of various autonomous behaviours that may be implemented by multiple learners, which poses a challenge while setting out some standards of readiness for autonomy. The landscape of learner training may be a more manageable area for assessment. However, the fact that a learner knows about learning strategies is not equivalent to them being ready to use them in practice. Benson (2001: 51) draws attention to this fact by saying "[a]lthough we may be able to identify and list behaviours that demonstrate control over learning [...], we have little evidence to suggest that autonomy consists of any particular combination of these behaviours".

The problem of teacher autonomy set out by Little (1991) is also of importance in evaluating the students' readiness for autonomy. In fact, Little (1995)

claims learner autonomy develops through a negotiation of rights and responsibilities throughout the teaching process in which both learners and teachers exercise their own autonomy. It suggests teacher autonomy is an indispensable factor in the development of students' readiness for autonomy. Johnson (2006) believes an autonomous teacher who can empower learners should be an aim of current teacher education. However, he admits that in formal education teacher autonomy, as well as learner autonomy, is heavily constrained by syllabi and examination requirements. While discussing the roles of an autonomous teacher, Benson (2007) identifies the role of a mediator between students and educational authorities that a teacher needs to perform in class while promoting learner autonomy.

Benson (2001) goes on to say that autonomous behaviour is self-initiated, even if a response to a task gives the learner a choice of more or less autonomous actions. It introduces another issue that has been discussed in the literature on learner autonomy for more than a decade: the connection between the learners' motivation to learn the language and learner autonomy (Lamb 2011; Ushioda 2011, 2014). Since these two concepts seem critically interconnected, increasing the students' motivation should result in an increase of their autonomy, given they have the skills and abilities and attitudes mentioned above (Benson 2001; Veenman 2011; Mousavi Arfae 2017). Being a critical component of the construct of learner autonomy, motivation is in itself a complex and dynamic concept, which makes the assessment of readiness for autonomy even more challenging.

2.2. Benefits of assessing readiness for autonomy

Even if autonomy is a capacity rather than a learned and consciously controlled skill, it is widely known that the act of assessment affects the decisions students make about learning. Therefore, assessing autonomy may be of importance when considering it from the perspective of institutional policy that aims to create or influence the culture of learning at the institution. Both learners and teachers are likely to be more motivated to implement autonomous learning into their daily practice, which may result in a permanent change in their learning behaviours (Boud 2002; Ramsden 2003).

Another vital benefit of assessing learner autonomy lies in its informative value that has the potential to encourage more individualised, student-centred learning and teaching on the level of a group of learners as well as in individual students' cases. The teacher, supported by information about the level of the group members' readiness for autonomy, will be able to provide spot-on learner training

and individualised support to those who need it. It is crucial in every group, but large or mixed ability groups are likely to benefit most from such an approach.

Lastly, tools that test learner autonomy also have the potential to direct learners' attention to specific practices and may result in initiating or intensifying certain behaviours. Lai's (2001) study is an example of such influence. It describes the development of two rating scales related to process control (task level, using listening journal) and self-direction. Another study that showed positive effects of assessment of learner autonomy was an action research study by Champagne et al. (2001) looking at students' performance (c-test) and process (qualitative analysis of portfolio entries, observations and interviews). The study emphasised the need for students to take part in self-assessment and for process assessment to become a fundamental part of the overall evaluation. O'Leary (2007) came to a similar conclusion, adding that the type of the assessment activity noticeably plays an integral role in the growth of autonomy.

Considering the different approaches mentioned above, the authors conducted a small-scale, exploratory study of students' readiness for autonomy, which will be described in the following parts of the paper.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study mainly focuses on the students' beliefs and attitudes about the teacher's roles in the language classroom. The way the learners perceive the role of the teacher in the teaching process is crucial for their approach to the process of learning. Simultaneously, it is also examined if the beliefs and attitudes differ depending on the learning context the respondents are in (Poland or Serbia).

3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix I) was developed on the basis of Cirocki, Anam & Retnaningdyah (2019), Chan (2001), Spratt, Humphreys & Chan (2002) and Thang & Alias (2007). The original questionnaire was reduced to statements related to the teacher's role in the learning process, with the premise that the statements related to the role of the teacher would be informative as to the learners' attitude to autonomy and the results may guide the authors as to a further investigation of students' readiness for autonomy. It consisted of 14 items/statements on the teacher's role in the learning process, which students assessed on a scale from 0 (never) to 10 (always). In other words, students were given 14 items on which they should agree/disagree, in a way deciding who (a teacher or themselves) is responsible

for the learning process. All questions refer to students' perceptions of the teacher's role in the process of learning. The questionnaire was translated to native languages of the participants, Polish and Serbian. The translated instruments were piloted on 5 Polish and 5 Serbian students. The participants of the pilots reviewed the clarity and layout of the documents. They proposed minor improvements, which were implemented by the authors.

3.2. Sample

The study was carried out at two higher education institutions (University of Applied Sciences in Tarnow, Poland and University of Belgrade, Faculty of Agriculture, Serbia). The research sample consisted of two subsamples amounting to a total of 79 students – 30 Polish and 49 Serbian students. The Polish sample included first-year students of the Department of Nursing. The Serbian sample consisted of first-year students of two study programmes (Plant Production and Animal Sciences). The main learning objectives comprised acquisition of various competences (reading, listening, speaking and writing as well as linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural competences). The overall sample can be a good starting point for future research encompassing a higher number of respondents/students and different higher education institutions. This preliminary research can help gain an insight into students' readiness for learning autonomy. Even though the results refer only to small groups of students and they cannot be generalised, they can undoubtedly demonstrate some trends within the particular group. Similarly to other variables necessary for the learning process (e.g., motivation, needs/wants, competencies), readiness for autonomy is changeable and, to a large extent, depends on the specific groups and individuals.

As far as the level of English language competence is concerned, the Polish sample contained students of B1 and B2 language competence¹, while the Serbian sample was a mixed-ability group with language competence ranging from A2 to C1 CEFR.

3.3. Research

The questionnaire (14 items) was administered to all students at the beginning of their English language courses (ESP courses) in the academic year 2019/2020. The questionnaire was anonymous and voluntary. The questions were

¹ According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

given in students' first languages, that is, in Polish and Serbian, since the differences in the respondents' English language competence would have put some of them in an unfavourable position. Students were asked to answer the questions as honestly as possible and they were informed that the results would be used only for educational and scientific purposes without disclosing their identities in any case.

3.4. Interpretation of results

The results were mostly quantitatively interpreted. For reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated and it was .83, which implies high internal consistency/reliability. In addition, for identifying the relationships between frequencies of students' responses, the chi-square test was carried out (at the .05 significance level) using the R software.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study will be interpreted by comparing the results obtained for both groups (Figure 2).

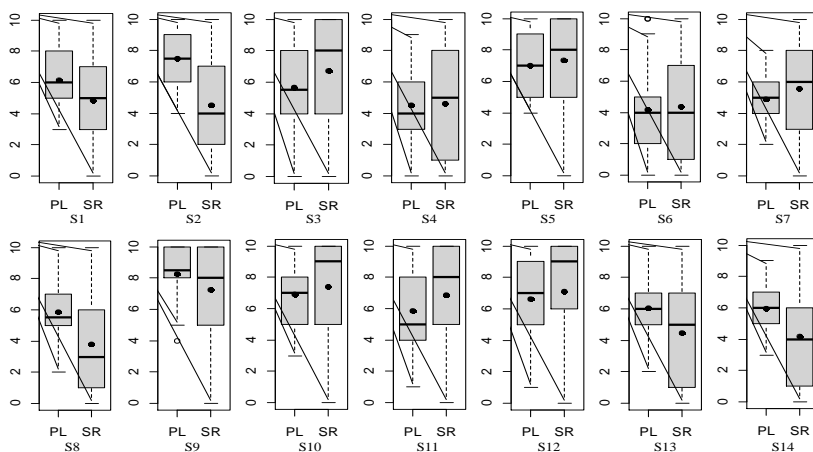


Figure 2. The boxplot showing the students' responses to fourteen statements (S1–S14), grouped by country: Poland (PL) and Serbia (SR).

According to Figure 2, when comparing the responses of Polish and Serbian students to Statement 1, Polish students had a mean value of 6.17, showing a preference for having their teacher explain everything without asking questions and testing for understanding. On the other hand, Serbian students had a mean value of 4.86, implying a slight dislike of this type of instruction. The standard deviation of

1.95 for Polish students suggests moderate variability, while the standard deviation of 3.20 for Serbian students reflects greater variability. Both groups generally preferred this method of instruction, but the Polish students displayed less variability due to a lower standard deviation and smaller interquartile range. The p-value of 0.0006863 shows a statistically significant difference between the groups.

As for Statement 2, Figure 2 shows that Polish students had a mean response of 7.5, indicating a preference for teachers passing knowledge to quiet listeners. Serbian students had a mean response of 4.53, suggesting a slight tendency against this preference. Polish students showed less variation with a standard deviation of 1.59, while Serbian students had more variation with a standard deviation of 3.25. On the whole, Polish students preferred teachers passing knowledge to quiet listeners compared to Serbian students. The p-value of 0.00006463 shows statistical significance, indicating a dependence on the country.

In terms of Statement 3, Serbian students had a higher median preference score (8.00) than Polish students (5.50), indicating a stronger preference for teacher-led activities among Serbian students. The mean preference score for Serbian students (6.71) was also higher than that of Polish students (5.67), further supporting this observation. The standard deviation for Serbian students (3.40) was slightly higher than that of Polish students (2.84), suggesting slightly more variability in preference scores among Serbian students. The p-value of 0.1331 indicates that the responses were not statistically significant and were thus independent of the students' country of origin.

As seen in Figure 2, Polish students had a slightly higher mean response value of 4.53 for Statement 4, indicating a slight preference for teacher nominations. The standard deviation of 2.27 suggests moderate variability in preferences among Polish students. On the other hand, Serbian students had a somewhat lower mean response value of 4.59, indicating a slight preference against teacher nominations. The standard deviation of 3.69 suggests a higher amount of variability in preferences among Serbian students compared to Polish students. Overall, both groups showed varying preferences, but Serbian students' responses were more diverse and polarised, with a wider range of opinions compared to Polish students. However, the p-value of 0.09764 suggests that the observed differences between the two groups are not statistically significant, implying that the preferences expressed by the students did not depend on their country of origin.

When we compare the results for Polish and Serbian students on Statement 5 as shown in Figure 2, we find that Polish students had a mean preference of 7.00, aligning with the median. The standard deviation of 2.03 suggests some variation in

preferences among the Polish students. In contrast, the Serbian students had a slightly lower mean preference of 7.35 compared to the median (8.00), indicating a few responses toward the lower end of the scale. The standard deviation of 2.79 for Serbian students indicates a greater variation in preferences compared to Polish students. In general, both groups showed a variety of preferences for having their teacher identify their mistakes without asking them to do it, but the Polish students had a narrower spread, while the Serbian students had a slightly higher mean and a wider range of responses. The p-value of 0.009118 implies statistically significant differences between the two groups, dependent on the country.

Regarding Statement 6, as can be seen in Figure 2, both Polish and Serbian students had a similar median preference score of 4.00, indicating a neutral stance or slight inclination towards teacher control. Polish students had a mean score of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 2.54, suggesting moderate variability in their preferences. Serbian students had a slightly higher mean score of 4.37 and a larger standard deviation of 3.46, indicating a wider range of preferences. Polish students exhibited less variation, while Serbian students showed more diversity in their preference for teacher control. These differences may be influenced by cultural and educational factors specific to each country. The p-value of 0.02458 shows statistical significance in the obtained results.

Comparing the results for Polish and Serbian students, it is clear that in Statement 7, Polish students had a mean of 4.90, slightly below their median, indicating some tendency toward lower responses. On the other hand, Serbian students had a mean of 5.59, slightly higher than their median, indicating that they preferred to be nominated more often. The standard deviation for Polish students was 1.58, reflecting moderate variability in their responses. In contrast, Serbian students had a higher standard deviation of 3.31, indicating a wider range of preferences. Both groups generally preferred their teacher to nominate them for expressing their views, but Serbian students had a slightly stronger preference, as evidenced by higher median, mean and standard deviation values. The p-value of 0.001295 confirms the statistical significance of the dependence of students' responses on their country of origin.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the mean score for Statement 8 for Polish students was 5.87, slightly higher than the median, indicating that some students strongly preferred the presence of the teacher. The standard deviation of 2.05 shows the variability in Polish students' responses, suggesting different preferences. For Serbian students, the mean was 3.80, higher than the median, implying some students strongly preferred the teacher's presence. The standard deviation of 3.47 indicates

greater variability compared to Polish students. Overall, both groups had varying preferences, but Serbian students showed greater diversity. The p-value of 0.001937 indicates statistical significance.

In terms of Statement 9, Figure 2 demonstrates that Polish students (mean: 8.23) preferred feedback slightly more than the Serbian students (mean: 7.27). In addition, Polish students' responses were less dispersed (standard deviation: 1.65) compared to Serbian students' responses (standard deviation: 3.08). However, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant (p-value: 0.1295).

Regarding Statement 10, Serbian students (mean: 7.39) generally had a stronger preference for the described scenario (the teacher creates opportunities and all the activities are completed with him/her in the classroom without having homework) compared to the Polish students (mean: 6.90). Polish students' responses were less spread out (standard deviation: 1.95) than those of Serbian students' responses (standard deviation: 2.86). Nevertheless, the calculated p-value of 0.5405 indicates that the results were not statistically significant.

In terms of Statement 11, the Polish students tended to be neutral, with a median response of 5.00 and a mean response of 5.87. Polish students' responses varied moderately, with a standard deviation of 2.45. In contrast, the Serbian students tended to agree with the statement, as indicated by a median of 8.00 and mean response of 6.86. The standard deviation for Serbian students was slightly higher at 3.12. Polish students had a balanced distribution of preferences with a slight tendency toward neutrality, while Serbian students showed a stronger inclination toward agreement when it comes to the teacher's evaluation of students' work and asking students to evaluate their own work. It is important to consider cultural differences and context when interpreting these findings. The p-value of 0.06341 suggests no statistical significance between the two groups.

For Statement 12, Figure 2 shows that both Polish and Serbian students generally preferred their teacher to assess their classmates' work independently. However, Serbian students had a higher preference for this approach than the Polish students. The boxplot for the Polish students indicates a mean of 6.63, which was slightly lower than the median, implying the presence of lower values that pull the mean down. The standard deviation of 2.63 suggests moderate variability around the mean, but the distribution was not highly spread out. On the other hand, the boxplot for Serbian students shows that the majority of them preferred independent assessment by their teacher. A mean of 7.12 was lower than the median, indicating the influence of lower values on the mean. The standard deviation of 3.64 suggests moderate variation in preferences among Serbian students. Both groups preferred

independent assessment by their teacher, as indicated by the higher median and mean values in both cases. However, Serbian students, on average, displayed stronger preferences. The p-value of 0.4665 indicates no statistical significance between the two groups.

In terms of Statement 13, Polish students (mean: 6.03) had a slightly higher average score than Serbian students (mean: 4.47). This indicates that Polish students were more inclined to help teachers select teaching materials. However, the standard deviation for Serbian students (3.47) was larger than that of Polish students (1.99), suggesting more varied responses among the Serbian students. These findings suggest that, on average, Polish students were more willing to assist their teachers than the Serbian students. It is important to note that these interpretations have been based on limited data and may not be representative of the entire population. Further analysis and data would be needed for more generalisable conclusions. The p-value of 0.00447 indicates the statistical significance of these results.

For Statement 14, Figure 2 indicates that both Polish and Serbian students showed a slight preference against thinking about activities related to learning English. Polish students had a mean of 5.93 and a standard deviation of 1.46, indicating less variability in their preferences. Serbian students had a mean of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 2.95, showing greater variability in their responses. The p-value of 0.001234 suggests that the differences in responses were statistically significant and dependent on the country. Further investigation is needed to understand the underlying reasons behind these preferences, taking into account cultural, educational, or personal factors.

Taking into account the results obtained, we can see that there are differences and similarities between the two groups investigated. Some of the differences were statistically significant (items 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14) suggesting that the differences are country dependent. The obtained boxplot and chi-square results can help to interpret the results as quantitatively as possible and to find statistical significance. However, we should take a more comprehensive picture into account, bearing in mind that each student is an individual *per se* with a variety of differences and skills related to their readiness for autonomy. Furthermore, it can also be observed that the responses of Serbian students were more dispersed, which means that variation in their responses was higher in comparison to their Polish peers, who seem rather unified in their beliefs about the way learning should be organised, managed and executed.

Our results corroborate the results of Rungwaraphong (2012) and Cirocki, Anam & Retnaningdyah (2019), who observed that their learners were not ready for

autonomous learning relying heavily on their teachers, and the results of Alizadeh & Ebrahimi (2019), who found that most students they examined were not prepared for autonomous learning supported by technologies. Moreover, our findings match the results of Alrabai (2017), who states that, although the tested students are aware of autonomy, their answers show their low level of autonomy. Similarly, Farahani (2014) indicates that the level of students' awareness of autonomy is not in accordance with what is seen in practice. Namely, they still perceive the teacher as an ultimate source of information and guidance.

In addition, regarding the teacher's role in the learning process, our results are to some extent in agreement with the findings of Chan (2001: 509–510), who claims that students had a divided perception – they liked when their teacher decided on what and how to learn, but they also liked when the teacher gave them a task, made them work without supervision and detect their own missteps. On the other hand, taking into account the learner's role, Chan (2001: 510) has observed that students would like to decide on learning activities and the curriculum, which only partially corresponds to our findings. Sometimes, it can happen that students think that they are ready for autonomous learning whereas their teachers are not of the same opinion, implying a need for negotiation (Lin & Reinders 2019), thus our study may be broadened by surveying teachers' perceptions as well.

The cultural dimension of autonomy is also an interesting point to follow up on in further studies. Taking Hofstede's (2011) dimensions into consideration, the results of the questionnaire generally correspond to the culture-bound descriptions of Polish and Serbian educational cultures that the Hofstede model predicts. However, there are some points that need consideration such as, for example, the fact that Polish students seem more reliant on the teacher than the Serbian ones, even though the model developed by Hofstede suggests the opposite (Hofstede 2011: 9–11).

5. CONCLUSION

The concept of learner autonomy has been present in foreign language pedagogy for several decades. Knowing whether and to what extent students are ready for autonomous learning can be of immense help, both to teachers and students. Informed teachers can design activities and tasks that will gradually guide their students into becoming active participants in decision-making. While the concept is quite complex and involves overt knowledge, skills, motivation and attitudes to the roles of the learner and the teacher, it seems important to start with

evaluating the latter, as it is the students' beliefs about what they and the teacher should do that influence all the other factors.

The research was carried out at two higher education institutions in Poland and Serbia to find out whether and to what extent students felt they were ready for autonomous learning. The 14-item questionnaire was administered asking students to assess the statements/items given deciding on whether the teacher rather than themselves should be responsible for certain aspects of the learning process.

It appeared that students participating in the study are generally not ready for autonomous learning and that for many items they were somewhere in-between as they had no opinion. As for other similarities, both Polish and Serbian students preferred the responsibility being placed on the teacher, particularly when it comes to creating opportunities and doing all tasks in the classroom rather than for homework. The same was valid for assessing other students' work, with respondents showing no interest in collaborative learning, self-evaluation or self-reflection. As for differences, it was observed that Polish students preferred to be explained everything without being asked for their opinion. They also did not want to participate in choosing activities/texts to be used in class or be involved in reflecting on the activities. They preferred their teacher to be near, lacking the confidence needed to provide feedback or make real choices.

It seems that differences prevailed, although Figure 2 shows that they were not huge. The chi-square evaluation shows that some differences observed were statistically significant, whereas some differences were independent of the country the students come from. Since the study was preliminary and a small sample of respondents was employed, the results cannot be generalised. However, there are reasons to issue a strong recommendation for the two institutions taking part in the study to implement actions that may influence the students' beliefs about learners' and teachers' roles. If students do not change their attitudes it may be rather difficult to foster autonomous behaviour among the learners, which may have detrimental effects on their future professional development. As recommended by Benson (2001), such actions might include overt instruction introducing and discussing the concept of learner autonomy on the level of a study programme. Such a course might include references to culture-bound inclinations which make students unable to widen their scope of learning behaviour. Another way of approaching learner autonomy is to discuss the problem with teachers at the faculty, recommending the incorporation of learner autonomy-oriented activities into every course of the study programme. A set of incremental interventions aimed at raising students' awareness of the importance of learner autonomy and helping them take control of their learning

implemented on a program-wide scale may result in noticeable changes in their readiness for autonomy.

Applying a questionnaire to find out about students' readiness for autonomy is the basic first step, however, it is essential to take into account not only the responses of the group as a whole but also to go one step further and investigate each response of each student. Further research on this topic should include more students as well as more institutions. It would also be interesting to see whether there is a dependence on the educational culture the respondents grew up in, which could involve developing the study in several countries. The teachers could be also included as respondents since sometimes, as mentioned in the literature, there can be some contradictions in the perceptions of teachers' and students' roles in the classroom. What is more, the tool used in the study may need to be refined, piloted and validated in countries other than Poland. There are authors who believe the influence of the learning context on the informative value of the tool may drop substantially if employed in a culturally different learning environment (Teo 2013).

While it is valuable to refer to the findings on the students' readiness for autonomy while designing a course and preparing materials for them, the limitations of the study need to be taken into consideration before attempting to use the results in the learning environment. The first limitation concerns a limited sample that was investigated in each country, insufficient for generalising the results. A further limitation is the variety of the level of English proficiency within the sample. While the study aims at evaluating students' beliefs and convictions about the role of the teacher in the learning process, it may be informative to consider the influence of students' foreign language proficiency level as a factor in exploring the data. Another constraint refers to the construct itself which, by nature, is dynamic and prone to change. Any such investigation is merely able to give the researcher a glimpse of the situation at a given point in time rather than a constant that may be relied on. Also, it must be remembered that the study concerns only one aspect of a complex construct. Therefore, a more comprehensive tool needs to be developed in the future to enable teachers to have a wide-ranging insight into their students' readiness for autonomy.

REFERENCES

- Alizadeh, I. & Ebrahimi, F. (2019). Investigating medical students' readiness for technology-mediated autonomous learning situations in ESP programs. *Education and Information Technologies* 24 (6): 3289–3309. doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-09929-9.

- Alrabai, F. (2017). From teacher dependency to learner independence: a study of Saudi learners' readiness for autonomous learning of English as a Foreign Language. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 14 (1): 70–97. doi.org/10.18538/lthe.v14.n1.262.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Harlow: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40 (1): 21–40. doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003958.
- Boud, D. (2002). Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary?, in *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*, ed. P. Knight (London: Kogan Page): 35–48.
- Champagne M.-F., Clayton, T., Dimmitt, N., Laszewski, M., Savage, W., Shaw, J., Stroupe, R., Myint Thein, M. & Walter, P. (2001). The assessment of learner autonomy and language learning. *The AILA Review* 15: 45–55.
- Chan, V. (2001). Readiness for Learner Autonomy: What do our learners tell us?. *Teaching in Higher Education* 6 (4): 505–518. doi.org/10.1080/1356251012007804.
- Chik, A., Aoki, N. & Smith, R. (Eds.). (2018). *Autonomy in language learning and teaching: New research agendas. Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cirocki, A., Anam, S. & Retnaningdyah, P. (2019). Readiness for Autonomy in English Language Learning: The Case of Indonesian High School Students. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* 7 (2): 1–18. Accessed 10. 6. 2021. URL: <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1220734.pdf>>.
- Farahani, M. (2014). From spoon feeding to self-feeding: Are Iranian EFL learners ready to take charge of their own learning? *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* 11(1): 98–115. Accessed 11. 11. 2020. URL: <<https://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v11n12014/farahani.pdf>>.
- Hisham, D. (2004). *The teacher is always there, but isn't...Learners' perspectives and experiences of distance learning at the University Utara Malaysia*. University of East Anglia dissertation.
- Hofstede, G. (2011) Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2 (1). doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford/New York: Pergamon.

- Johnson, K. E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly* 40 (1): 235–257. doi.org/10.2307/40264518.
- Lamb, M. (2011). Which came first, the worm or the cocoon?, in *Autonomy in Language Learning: Opening a Can of Worms*, ed. C. Everard, J. Mynard & R. Smith (Kent: IATELF): 111–113.
- Lai, J. (2001). Towards an analytic approach to assessing learner autonomy. *The AILA Review* 15: 34–44.
- Lin, L. & Reinders, H. (2019). Students' and teachers' readiness for autonomy: beliefs and practices in developing autonomy in the Chinese context. *Asia Pacific Education Review* 20: 69–89. doi.org/10.1007/s12564-018-9564-3.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System* 23 (2): 175–182.
- Mousavi Arfae, A. (2017). *Language Learner Autonomy in Ontario's ESL Context*. The University of Western Ontario dissertation. Accessed 20. 7. 2021. URL: <<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?articleL6981&contextL2td>>.
- Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy, in *Autonomy and independence in language learning*, ed. P. Benson & P. Voller (London: Longman): 192–203.
- O'Leary, C. (2007). Should Learner Autonomy Be Assessed?, in *Proceedings of the Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference: Exploring theory, enhancing practice: Autonomy across the disciplines*. Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan, October 2007: 1–9. Accessed 20. 5. 2021. URL: <<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/4198/>>.
- Oladoke, A. O. (2006). *Measurement of self-directed learning in online learners*. Capella University dissertation.
- Palfreyman, D. & Smith, R. C. (Eds.). (2003). *Learner Autonomy across Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. doi.org/10.1057/9780230504684.
- R Core Team (2020). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. URL: <<https://www.R-project.org/>>.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London & New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Rungwaraphong, P. (2012). Student Readiness for Learner Autonomy: Case Study at a University in Thailand. *Asian Journal on Education and Learning* 3 (2):

- 28–40. Accessed 11. 11. 2020. URL: <<https://www.thaiscience.info/Journals/Article/AJEL/10836621.pdf>>.
- Sinclair, B. (2000). Learner Autonomy: the Next Phase?, in *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*, ed. I. McGrath, B. Sinclair & T. Lamb (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited): 4–14.
- Sinclair, B. (2009). The Teacher as Learner: Developing Autonomy in an Interactive Learning Environment, in *Maintaining Control: Autonomy and Language Learning*, ed. R. Pemberton, S. Toogood & A. Barfield (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press): 175–198.
- Spratt M., Humphreys, G. & Chan, V. (2002). Autonomy and motivation: which comes first? *Language Teaching Research* 6 (3): 245–266. doi.org/10.1191%2F1362168802lr106oa.
- Stroet, K., Opendakker, M. & Minnaert, A. (2013). Effects of need supportive teaching on early adolescents' motivation and engagement: A review of the literature. *Educational Research Review* 9: 65–87. doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2012.11.003.
- Thang, S. M. & Alias, A. (2007). Investigating readiness for autonomy: A comparison of Malaysian ESL undergraduates of three public universities. *Reflections on English Language Teaching* 6(1): 1–18. Accessed 10. 6. 2021. URL: <<https://www.nus.edu.sg/celc/research/books/reft/vol6/no1/1-18thang.pdf>>.
- Teo, T. (2013). Examining the psychometric properties of the epistemic beliefs inventory (EBI). *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 31 (1): 72–79. doi.org/10.1177%2F0734282912449436.
- Ushioda, E. (2011). Why autonomy? Insights from motivation theory and research. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 5 (2): 221–232. doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2011.577536.
- Ushioda, E. (2014). Motivation, autonomy and metacognition: exploring their interactions, in *Motivation and Foreign Language Learning: from Theory to Practice*, ed. D. Lasagabaster, A. Doiz & J. M. Sierra (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company): 31–50.
- Veenman, M. V. J. (2011) Learning to self-monitor and self-regulate, in *Handbook of Research on Learning and Instruction*, ed. R. Mayer & P. Alexander (New York: Routledge): 197–218.
- Yıldırım, Ö. (2008). Turkish EFL Learners' Readiness for Learner Autonomy. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 4 (1): 65–80. Accessed 17. 10. 2020. URL: <<http://www.jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/57/57>>.

Yu, R. (2020). On Fostering Learner Autonomy in Learning English. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 10 (11): 1414–1419. [dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1011.09](https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1011.09).

APPENDIX I

1 I prefer my teacher to explain everything to me without asking me questions and testing my thinking.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

2 I prefer my teacher to pass knowledge to students who quietly listen to his/her presentation/explanation.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

3 I prefer my teacher to give me activities to work on (either on my own or with my classmates), telling me the exact steps I should take to complete them.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

4 I prefer my teacher to nominate me to talk about my interests.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

5 I prefer my teacher to tell me what my mistakes are without asking me to identify them on my own.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

6 I prefer my teacher to control my learning; I am not good at working on my own.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

7 I prefer my teacher to nominate me to express my views in the classroom.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

8 I prefer my teacher to be around as I do not feel confident of learning on my own.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

9 I prefer my teacher to give me regular feedback on my work and tell me how to improve things.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

10 I prefer my teacher to create opportunities where all the activities can be completed with him/her in the classroom, and thus no homework is set.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

11 I prefer my teacher to assess my work on his/her own without asking me to make any judgements.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

12 I prefer my teacher to assess my classmates' work on his/her own without asking me to make any judgements.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

13 I prefer my teacher not to ask me to help him/her to select activities or texts to work on in the classroom because I do not have sufficient knowledge.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

14 I prefer my teacher not to involve me in reflecting on the activities I have done, as such activities have nothing to do with learning English.

0 = never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = always

Ana A. Stefanovič-Kocol
Univerzitet primenjenih nauka u Tarnovu
Fakultet humanističkih nauka
Danijela D. Đorđević
Univerzitet u Beogradu
Poljoprivredni fakultet

**EKSPLOATIVNO ISTRAŽIVANJE SPREMNOSTI STUDENATA ZA
AUTONOMIJU U OKVIRU KONTEKSTA ENGLLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE:
SLUČAJ DVEJU ZEMALJA**

Sažetak

Rad istražuje da li su studenti spremni za autonomno učenje engleskog jezika struke na tercijarnom nivou. Podizanje svesti studenata o autonomiji i procena njihove spremnosti da preuzmu odgovornost za svoje učenje važni su koraci za nastavnike, studente i obrazovne institucije. Glavni cilj ovog istraživanja bio je da se utvrdi da li su studenti spremni da usvoje autonomiju tokom procesa učenja na univerzitetskom nivou i u kojoj meri. Uzorak za ovo istraživanje sastojao se od ukupno 79 ispitanika iz Poljske (Univerzitet primenjenih nauka u Tarnovu) i Srbije (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Poljoprivredni fakultet). Generalno posmatrano, studenti iz oba poduzorka bili su skloni tome da odgovornost za svoje učenje prebace na nastavnika. Drugim rečima, izgleda da nijedna grupa studenata nije spremna za autonomno učenje, izbegavajući aktivno učešće u donošenju odluka koje se odnose na kurs. Ovo se posebno odnosi na stvaranje prilika i obavljanje zadataka u učionici. Isto važi i za ocenjivanje rada drugih studenata, gde ispitanici nisu pokazali interesovanje za saradničko učenje i samoevaluaciju. Kada pogledamo razlike, uočava se da su studenti iz Poljske skloniji tome da im se sve objasni i da ih niko ne pita za mišljenje. Oni nisu želeli da učestvuju ni u biranju aktivnosti ili tekstova koji bi se koristili na času. Više su voleli da nastavnik bude blizu i pokazivali su nedostatak samopouzdanja koje je potrebno za pružanje povratne informacije ili pravljenje izbora. Pored analiziranja rezultata ovakvog upitnika, bitno je istražiti i odgovore svakog studenta zasebno. S obzirom na to da je ovo istraživanje eksplorativno i manjeg obima, potrebno je u nekom budućem istraživanju uključiti i veći broj ispitanika i institucija.

Ključne reči: engleski jezik struke, autonomija učenika, spremnost, tercijarni nivo obrazovanja, Poljska, Srbija.

Received: 26 May 2023

Accepted: 7 July 2023