

Krisztina Szócs**YOUNG LEARNERS AND AUTONOMY SUPPORT IN
LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Justifications for promoting learner autonomy are manifold, however, throughout the previous decades, the majority of research on learner autonomy has focused on adult or teenage language learners, with limited attention given to elementary school students. This led to a lack of research on young learners, even though this group is recognized as the fastest growing group of language learners worldwide.

The concept of autonomy in learning suggests that knowledge is not just passed on and learned but is instead created actively by individuals in the learning process and is developed through social interaction. Over the past 40 years, researchers have embraced different research methodologies to investigate the development of learner autonomy. According to one of the most influential definitions of the concept, learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning,¹ which implies that it is an attribute of the learner, there are degrees of autonomy, which are unstable and variable. Autonomy in learning refers to learners' ability and desire to manage their learning both in and outside of the classroom using learning strategies and resources, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate their learning process through reflection. The term autonomy has been used in at least five different ways:² for situations in which students learn entirely on their own; for a set of skills which can be learned and applied for self-directed learning; for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; for the practice of learners' responsibility for their own learning; for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

Research³ revealed that autonomy grows the most in the area where ability, desire, and freedom intersect, defining freedom as the extent to which learners can manage their own learning process. While the overlap is limited, teachers have a clear impact on learners' skills, knowledge, motivation, and autonomy in learning. Autonomy comes in various dimensions and forms, which vary depending on the person and their surroundings and learners display independent actions in diverse manners.

The main field of autonomy research is the interaction between motivation and self-regulated learning. It has been recognized that motivation is crucial in autonomous learning and now motivation and autonomy are seen as closely interconnected concepts,⁴ research identified learner autonomy as one of the

¹ HOLEC, Henri: *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1979.

² BENSON, Phil; VOLLER, Peter: *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Routledge, 2014.

³ BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.

⁴ KORMOS Judit: *A nyelvtanulási autonómia, az önszabályozó stratégiák és a motiváció kapcsolatának vizsgálata*. Magyar Pedagógia, 2012/1. 3–17.; USHIODA, Ema: *Motivation and good language learners*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

essential factors for motivating language learners. Autonomous learners experience increased enjoyment in learning, highlighting the relationship between intrinsic motivation, self-directedness and autonomy, motivation being one of the most important predictors of the success in language learning.

Despite the benefits of learner autonomy, teachers may encounter various obstacles when guiding their students in developing autonomy: success depends on individual differences, level of motivation, momentary state of mind, students' socioeconomic background, and the learning environment, including classroom atmosphere, group dynamics, and time constraints.⁵ Furthermore, supporting autonomy with young learners can be even more difficult because they may not be mature enough to make decisions, and teachers may face challenges such as institutional restrictions and requirements from school management when trying to promote autonomy. Also, learners show autonomous behaviours in various ways, this leads to different approaches to autonomy that should be taken into consideration when fostering learner autonomy in different school contexts.

Teachers play a crucial role in autonomy development⁶ by establishing a classroom environment that encourages learner independence. This often entails acknowledging students' past learning experiences and highlighting the advantages of taking more control over their own learning. Teachers need to recognize their impact on learning and the need of change in their roles: they are expected to be not only knowledge providers but also managers, resource persons, and counsellors. Therefore, it is important to understand teachers' perspectives on autonomy⁷ as teachers' attitudes influence the choices they make, ultimately shaping how they behave in the classroom. Nevertheless, beliefs can be intricate, sometimes conflicting, and subject to change.⁸ Additionally, teachers may not always align their beliefs with their classroom practices, which can be influenced by experience, context, and situational constraints. According to a case study,⁹ teachers were open to the idea of including learner autonomy in their teaching but hesitated to engage students in methodological choices and referred to institutional limitations as hindering them in autonomy support.

The importance of autonomy in learning had been acknowledged to the extent that it was integrated into the main objectives of the National Core Curriculum, which was implemented in 1996 and established the criteria for various knowledge areas, since then it has undergone multiple revisions. The modifications to the curriculum led to a transition from focusing on encyclopaedic knowledge to emphasizing the use of knowledge and skills. However, the overview

⁵ SZŐCS Krisztina: *Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study*. Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies, 2017. 11.

⁶ BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.

⁷ BORG, Simon–AL-BUSAIDI, Saleh: *Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices*. British Council, London, 2012.

⁸ BORG, Simon: *Teacher cognition and language education*. Continuum, London, 2015.; SZŐCS Krisztina: *Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study*. Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies, 2017. 11.

⁹ CAMILLERI GRIMA, Antoinette: *Pedagogy for autonomy, teachers' attitudes and institutional change: A case study*. Peter Lang GmbH, 2007.

on recent research in the Hungarian language teaching and learning context show that willingness to learn autonomously decreases with age,¹⁰ there may be a difference between different types of schools, more experienced language learners also have problems in managing their learning process autonomously, furthermore, there is not a complete overlap between learners' beliefs and autonomous behaviour, and negative language learning experiences are more likely to lead to autonomy than positive ones.¹¹

Reasons for encouraging self-directed learning are manifold: learner involvement in decision-making concerning the learning process boosts motivation, makes learning more purposeful, thus resulting in more efficient learning.¹² Since it is impossible to teach everything that students need, it is essential to impart skills that can be applied to various learning situations, recognizing that learning continues beyond the classroom.¹³ In the 21st century content knowledge is increasingly shifting to skill and competence knowledge; the development of autonomous learning competences may be one of the answers to the problems and challenges of education today.

It is agreed¹⁴ that autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies, play active role in their learning, use learning resources, they can identify their strengths and weaknesses, make the most of their time in the classroom and organize their own learning outside the classroom. They are also willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs, are good guessers, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy; develop the target language into a separate reference system, have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language, reflect on their learning process and evaluate their learning. Altogether, autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning, show responsibility, and are voluntarily involved in opportunities for practice. Furthermore, looking into young learners' characteristics, there can be seen several features that point towards autonomy: young learners are agreed to be curious and enthusiastic, open for interaction, keen to make guesses.¹⁵ Therefore, keeping in mind that children learn by doing, have an instinct for fun and play, and have capacity for indirect learning, i.e. choosing age-appropriate techniques, it is reasonable to introduce autonomy development at an early age.

As mentioned earlier, teachers play a paramount role in autonomy support, therefore, investigating their beliefs concerning learner autonomy could lead to

¹⁰ ALBERT Ágnes–TANKÓ Gyula–PINIEL Katalin: *A tanulók válaszai a 11. évfolyamon. Vizsgálat a köznevelésben folyó idegennyelv-oktatás hatékonyságáról*. Kutatási jelentés, OH-EMMI, Bp., 2018. 93–63.

¹¹ CSIZÉR Kata–ÖVEGES Enikő: *Nyelvtanulási autonómia és nyelvi tervezés: egy vegyes módszerű kutatás eredményei*. Modern Nyelvoktatás, 2020/1-2. 44–58. <https://ojs.elte.hu/modernnyelvok/article/view/1459/1241> [02.11.2024]

¹² LITTLE, David: *Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited*. International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 2007/1. 14–29.

¹³ NUNAN, David: *Learner-centered English language education: The selected works of David Nunan*. Routledge, 2012.

¹⁴ LITTLE, David: *Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching*. Language Teaching, 2022/1. 64–73.; BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.

¹⁵ PINTÉR Annamária: *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

deeper understanding regarding their practices as beliefs affect teachers' decision making which has an impact on classroom practices. However, researching beliefs can be challenging as they are complex, not directly observable and can change over time.¹⁶ Looking into teachers' perceptions, research revealed that teachers agreed on the positive effects of learner autonomy and emphasised the importance of the personalised pace of learning, deeper understanding and sense of achievement.¹⁷ They viewed motivation as the most powerful factor to influence autonomy in language learning, considered learners' socioeconomic background essential in autonomy development and found life experience and language learning experience more relevant than age. Teachers' views on autonomy were shaped by their own learning experiences and the impact of their previous teachers. Research revealed that teachers were aware of the strong potential of technology, although they emphasised the need for proper guidance. As drawbacks, they found error correction problematic, feared to lose control over their lessons and agreed on the importance of teacher-directedness.¹⁸ Altogether, teachers believed that most students were not ready to take control over their learning, they were more concerned about immediate learning goals and driven by extrinsic motives.

The study

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into primary school teachers' autonomy supportive practices and perceived difficulties in autonomy support with young learners. The participants of the research were six elementary school English teachers, from a medium sized elementary school in a county seat in the central part of Hungary, where English as a foreign language is taught from the first grade starting from one lesson per week, reaching three lessons per week in the 6th grade. The number of pupils in a language class ranged between 11–17. The age of the participants varied between 34–57, five female and one male, they spent 10–35 years on the field of education. Data was collected with semi-structured interviews in Hungarian in 2023 December.

Looking for emerging patterns, the interviews revealed that even though supporting autonomy has its acknowledged benefits, practicing teachers faced several challenges when trying to support it with young learners. From the responses of the participants three major areas could be identified as when they were asked about the most challenging factors in promoting autonomy with their pupils: individual differences, temporary- and external factors. Among the individual differences the most frequently mentioned characteristics were lack of motivation, passivity, students not willing to speak up or cooperate in different work forms, referring to a great variety of excuses or expect the teacher to make decisions for them. Four of the respondents mentioned that their pupils might not be

¹⁶ BORG, Simon: *Teacher cognition and language education*. Continuum, London, 2015. 1–384.

¹⁷ BORG, Simon–AL-BUSAIDI, Saleh: *Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices*. British Council, London, 2012.

¹⁸ SZŐCS Krisztina: *Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study*. Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies, 2017. 11.

mature enough for decision making. As for temporary factors, all the participants recalled the short attention span as a characteristic of young age, early fatigue, being easily distracted, and pupils' momentary state of mind. Teachers agreed that autonomy requires lots of skills and they could observe different levels of autonomy with their learners.

External factors were also prevalent when discussing the challenges participants faced during autonomy support: learning context, classroom atmosphere, group dynamics were identified from the immediate circumstances. As for the larger scale, institutional expectations and constraints and the effects of the period of digital education generated by the Covid-19 pandemics were recalled to hinder autonomy support. Students' socio-educational background was also mentioned by half of the respondents as a cause for different levels of autonomy and different extent of openness towards learning autonomously. All teachers agreed that one of the biggest difficulties for them to integrate autonomy supportive practices into their daily classroom routine is caused by time constraints. Although autonomy was viewed as a desirable goal to reach, teachers had diverging views about the level of freedom their students should be given in the classroom.

As learning continues beyond the classroom, teachers must provide students with skills and strategies that they can apply to different learning scenarios to become their own most effective helpers.¹⁹ I asked the interviewees to describe activities and techniques that they included into their everyday practice that supported pupils' autonomy in language learning, that they found sustainable and feasible in their teaching context.

Offering appropriate learning strategies tailored to the learners' age is crucial. To achieve this, two of the respondents mentioned that they started the schoolyear with a "Learning to learn" module, where they provided pupils with language learning strategies in a playful way (i.e. how to organize notes, learn vocabulary, etc.). This can empower students to oversee their own progress in different areas of language learning, such as learning new vocabulary or organizing study materials.

Teachers found important to grab the attention of their young learners at the beginning of the learning process. Taking small steps was found especially important with young learners, just like taking advantage of play and scaffolding activities to increase confidence by making the activities familiar to the children. Three participants believed that it was simpler to handle a group of pupils when they were offered a selection of materials and tasks that cater to diverse learning styles and varying levels of abilities. They supported making smaller choices at the beginning, for example, students could choose between singing a song or acting out a story at the end of a lesson, select their role in a performance, determine the sequence of activities (if possible), make presentations on topics of their own choice (6th grade), and choose tasks based on their preferences from a list of options (e.g.: crossword or a wordsearch activity). Some of these opportunities for decision making were offered by the coursebook material. Four teachers provided learners with extra language exercises to differentiate between the higher

¹⁹ BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.

achievers and/ or pupils with special needs, one of them relied heavily on Kréta IFM, a language learning application with a gamification approach, which made differentiation on the level of individual students more feasible and manageable. When students were given the opportunity to choose topics for the upcoming class or were motivated to bring or create resources relevant to the lesson, it fosters a sense of importance in their contributions to the classroom, ultimately boosting their engagement in their own learning.²⁰ Moreover, enhancing lesson plans by incorporating real-life examples and referencing their own language learning experiences will increase involvement and motivation.

Encouraging students to act independently can be achieved by shifting from deductive to inductive methods when teaching grammar, vocabulary, and writing. Instead of direct instruction, students can deduce rules and meanings from examples, promoting guessing and taking risks in their learning process. Even though worded differently and in different classroom contexts, but allowing space for guessing and risk-taking in their daily practice was mentioned by five teachers.

As for work forms, participants agreed that group work and pair work was less manageable in the 1st and 2nd grade than with the older students, however, they tried to introduce all work forms early. Two teachers mentioned to introduce groupwork to discuss the instructions of the next activity, pupils could ask from the teacher only afterwards. Project work was found very time-consuming but enjoyable and rewarding for the pupils.

Concerning feedback and assessment, the interviewees said that they provided relevant feedback bearing in mind the individual level of autonomy of each pupil, worded accordingly. Three participants mentioned different ways of peer-assessment, where pupils could give opinion about or correct each other's work. An interviewee mentioned to include self-assessment in the language class by encouraging students to edit their written work starting from the 4th grade. She believed that mistakes are necessary and useful, they help pupils improve, also, support risk-taking. She asked her pupils to revise their corrected work (5th and 6th grade) and categorise their mistakes according to the following: a. I know this, but somehow forgot; b. I didn't know this, but it'd be good to remember it; c. I don't understand this.

Reflection on learning and identifying strengths and weaknesses is an important element in the process of becoming a self-directed learner,²¹ however, asking students to reflect on their learning experiences might not be realistic with young learners. Still, teachers assisted them in recognizing their strong points and areas needing improvement. To become more independent and to acquire the skill of assessing their own learning accurately, the series of coursebooks used at the institution offer checklists for self-assessment and reflection. Incorporating "Can do" statements at the conclusion of a lesson was found to be an easy method to do this. Additionally, a more detailed self-evaluation could be done by assigning a number between 1–5 to the statements to indicate their confidence levels in

²⁰ USHIODA, Ema: *Motivation and good language learners*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

²¹ BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.

the language area, however, only one participant mentioned that she incorporated in into her monthly practice.

To sum up, teachers believed that it is crucial to spark curiosity and captivate their students' attention at the beginning of the learning process. Additional support should be given in the early stages, with a gradual reduction in guidance as learning progresses, similarly, opportunities for practicing decision making should also be provided. They found that young learners showed some level of independence as they had some understanding of their learning styles and strategies, they understood their preferences but their actions were more based on what they liked rather than conscious strategy choice, several pupils approached learning tasks actively, however, they required additional encouragement and teacher support at times. Just like teenage and adult language learners,²² young learners were found to be open to taking risks, such as willingly communicating in English but not without limitations, enjoying experimenting with English.

Conclusions

The research showed that teachers had positive attitudes towards autonomy in language learning and were aware of autonomy supportive strategies that they integrated into their practices. Young learners' autonomy showed similar patterns as that of teenage learners': pupils could take some responsibility for their work if favourable conditions are provided and encouraged by the teacher. In a learner-friendly, positive environment where children feel safe it is more likely to be enthusiastic and motivated to work. Young learners also work more effectively if they are allowed to choose activities from options provided to them. Striving for autonomy with young learners is only the initial stage in their journey towards self-directed learning, self-awareness, and taking ownership of their growth. Developing learner autonomy with young learners is a lengthy process, not one step, but many, its successful implementation depends largely on the persistence of the teacher. The findings of the research carry pedagogical implications to practicing teachers and teacher educators as teachers' awareness should be raised about the importance of learner autonomy to help primary school teachers shape their learners' early learning experiences positively regarding autonomy development as they are the fastest growing group of language learners globally.

References

- ALBERT Ágnes–TANKÓ Gyula–PINIEL Katalin: *A tanulók válaszai a 11. évfolyamon. Vizsgálat a köznevelésben folyó idegennyelv-oktatás hatékonyságáról*, Kutatási jelentés, OH-EMMI, Bp., 2018. 93–163.
- BENSON, Phil: *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge, 2013.
- BENSON, Phil; VOLLER, Peter: *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Routledge, 2014.

²² BENSON, Phil; VOLLER, Peter: *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Routledge, 2014.

- BORG, Simon: *Teacher cognition and language education*. Continuum, London, 2015.
- BORG, Simon–AL-BUSAIDI, Saleh: *Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices*. British Council, London, 2012.
- CAMILLERI GRIMA, Antoinette: *Pedagogy for autonomy, teachers' attitudes and institutional change: A case study*. Peter Lang GmbH, 2007.
- HOLEC, Henri: *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1979.
- KORMOS Judit: *A nyelvtanulási autonómia, az önszabályozó stratégiák és a motiváció kapcsolatának vizsgálata*. Magyar Pedagógia, 2012/1. 3–17.
- LITTLE, David: *Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited*. International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 2007/1. 14–29.
- LITTLE, David: *Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching*. Language Teaching, 2022/1. 64–73.
- NUNAN, David: *Learner-centered English language education: The selected works of David Nunan*. Routledge, 2012.
- CSIZÉR Kata–ÖVEGES Enikő: *Nyelvtanulási autonómia és nyelvi tervezés: egy vegyes módszerű kutatás eredményei*. Modern Nyelvoktatás, 2020/1–2. 44–58. <https://ojs.elte.hu/modernnyelvok/article/view/1459/1241>
- PINTÉR Annamária: *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- SZŐCS Krisztina: *Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study*. Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies, 2017. 11.
- USHIODA, Ema: *Motivation and good language learners*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Absztrakt

FIATAL TANULÓK ÉS AZ ÖNÁLLÓSÁG TÁMOGATÁSA A NYELVTANULÁSBAN

A nyelvtanulói önállóság támogatása a nyelvtanulásban már korai életkortól kezdve alapvető fontosságú, mivel ez képessé teszi a tanulókat arra, hogy maguk irányítsák a tanulási folyamatot, növeli a motivációt és az elkötelezettséget. Az autonómia előmozdításával a tanárok hatással vannak az olyan alapvető készségek fejlődésére, mint a kritikus gondolkodás, a problémamegoldás és a döntéshozatal. Ezzel a tanulmányommal a tanulói önállóság megértését kívánom elmélyíteni, és a gyakorló általános iskolai tanárok autonómiatámogató gyakorlatának vizsgálatával néhány stratégiát kívánok feltárni az autonómia korai nyelvtanulásban való kiépítésére.

A gyakorlati stratégiák közé tartozik a tanulóközpontú környezet megteremtése, a választás és a reflexió lehetőségeinek felkínálása, valamint a tanulók önértékelési készségeinek erősítése. A technológia integrálása továbbá erősítheti az autonómiát azáltal, hogy személyre szabott tanulási tapasztalatokat és a különböző forrásokhoz való hozzáférést kínál. A nyelvtudás növelése mellett a tanulói önállóság elfogadása az alap-fokú nyelvoktatásban az egész életen át tartó tanulás szokásait is kialakítja, és felkészíti a fiatal tanulókat a sikerre egy egyre inkább összekapcsolódó és dinamikus világban. Ezen elképzelések megvalósítását hangsúlyozva a tanulmány kiemeli a tanárképzés, a tantervek adaptálása és a folyamatos támogatási rendszerek szükségességét.