



AN CHOMHAIRLE MHÚINTEOIREACHTA

The Teaching Council

Learner Autonomy and Language Learning

Research by Ruth Whelan (2008/09 Bursary Scheme)

Overview of Research

This research examined the impact of promoting learner autonomy with a view to improving the learner's personal strategies in second language acquisition. The researcher wished to discover if a classroom environment that encourages the students to take charge of their own learning leads to accelerated language acquisition. The researcher also sought to investigate the nature of the link between learner autonomy and the development of learning strategies.

Rationale and Aims

The aim of this research was to conduct an empirical study similar to one conducted by the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, TCD, based on the Council of Europe *European Language Portfolio* (ELP). That portfolio has provided a tool for learners to develop autonomy in their language learning. It was hypothesised that the promotion of learner autonomy would have a variety of effects on learners ranging from difficult-to-measure variables to easy-to-measure results. This research focussed on one area, the use of learning strategies by language learners, and sought to use the central ideas of the ELP and adapt it to an Irish post-primary context.

Learning strategies are seen as essential by researchers for language learners to overcome difficulties in language learning. Successful language learners develop their own repertoire of learning strategies. The researcher therefore sought to encourage learner autonomy through: learner involvement in target setting and in content and methodology decisions; the encouragement of reflection/written reflection; and classroom discussions and activities. Students were supported in reflecting on and monitoring their personal progress and in planning their future learning. The use of the target language as the medium of instruction was central to the research.

Design and Methodology

An action research approach was taken whereby the teacher acted as teacher/researcher. The researcher employed a case study approach, where the case was her class of 18 mixed ability students of Italian (senior cycle). The research involved three action cycles.

The research was qualitative in nature and the researcher used a number of research instruments. The main data collection tool was a language portfolio. This was based on the ELP and was employed for students to record their overall objectives/targets and to act as a reflective journal. Students recorded each activity and their objectives for that activity before engaging in it. Afterwards they reflected on the strategies used, the areas of difficulty identified and on possible solutions to those. A record of work was also included to track progress.

Two questionnaires were also used. The first of these [based on the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* published by Oxford] was administered at the beginning of the research to establish the learning strategies used by learners. The second was administered at the end to gather student opinions on the process of encouraging learner autonomy. These questionnaires were used to triangulate with the portfolios. Student interviews were also conducted to ascertain student perceptions of how their use of learning strategies changed.

The first action cycle focussed on the first negotiated unit of learning and involved: offering more choice and responsibility to students; introducing new classroom practices; an increased use of the target language; the modelling and practising of language learning strategies; and the use of a language portfolio.

The second cycle took account of the successes and difficulties of the first cycle and adjusted the plan accordingly. The teacher modified her approach and moved back to more teacher-directed lessons and more slowly towards autonomy.

The third cycle adjusted the plan further taking account of the challenges encountered during the second cycle. The reflection sheet was changed at this point making it less time-consuming.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this study were broadly in line with previous research, with some minor divergences.

Students reflected and reported on their own progress through both the questionnaires and the ELP. The researcher details statistically the strategies, direct and indirect, which were developed and used. Not all strategies used were recorded due to some student resistance to recording the use of strategies, a lack of awareness that the strategies were being used and the reluctance of some students to participate in the project or use the ELP.

Students recorded largely positive attitudes to learner autonomy in a questionnaire. While the majority liked being given a choice of activities and task options, they were less positive in their attitudes to writing reflections on their activities than in other areas. In keeping with previous study findings, opinion was divided on the usefulness of the portfolio.

Students cited time issues and examination pressure in their opposition to filling in a portfolio. Student expectation of teacher control, direction and pressure generated resistance to self-motivation. In an unfamiliar context of learner autonomy, students need assurance that classroom work is directed at syllabus coverage and examination success.