



Autonomous approach to English language learning and teaching in senior classes of secondary school

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Summary

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autonomy,
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The concept of autonomy in foreign language teaching is one of the most intriguing issues in the methodology of teaching and certainly one of the most difficult challenges for Polish education. Specialists agree that autonomy should be perceived in a complex, multidimensional way, taking into account its individual components such as motivation, self-esteem or independence, as well as a number of associations with various forms of practicing autonomy, including individual and team learning, the use of authentic materials, language guidance, and a negotiated syllabus. The main objective of this article is to broaden the understanding of the autonomous process of foreign language acquisition, with a particular emphasis on the approach to both learning and teaching English in senior-year classes of secondary school. This paper mainly aims to establish whether Polish high school graduates show the characteristics of autonomous learners, and further to shed light on to what extent classes are conducted following the promoted principle of student autonomy, and finally, it determines whether both students and teachers use the potential of independent learning and teaching, or whether their priority is exclusively to prepare for the upcoming exam. The findings indicate that although the greater number of graduating class students possess the characteristics of an autonomous learner, i.e., they have developed metacognitive and cognitive strategies along with an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, in most cases the development of autonomy encounters many obstacles due to the reluctance or lack of awareness of teachers themselves and institutional constraints such as curricula and examination requirements.

Autonomiczne podejście do nauki i nauczania języka angielskiego w klasach maturalnych (Streszczenie)

Słowa kluczowe:
autonomia, uczeń
autonomiczny,
glottodydaktyka,
akwizycja języka,
nauczanie języka

Pojęcie autonomii w nauczaniu języków obcych jest jednym z najbardziej intrygujących zagadnień w metodologii nauczania oraz z pewnością jednym z najtrudniejszych wyzwań dla szkolnictwa polskiego. Specjaliści zgodnie

podkreślają, że autonomię należy postrzegać w sposób kompleksowy, uwzględniając jej poszczególne elementy składowe, takie jak motywacja, poczucie własnej wartości czy samodzielność, zwracając także uwagę na szereg powiązań z różnorodnymi formami rozwijania autonomii, w tym kształcenie indywidualne i zespołowe, wykorzystywanie autentycznych materiałów, doradztwo językowe czy negocjowany program nauczania. Zasadniczym celem niniejszego artykułu jest poszerzenie wiedzy na temat autonomicznego procesu nauki języka obcego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem podejścia do nauki i nauczania języka angielskiego w klasach maturalnych. Przedmiotem rozważań jest ustalenie, czy polscy maturzyści wykazują cechy uczniów autonomicznych, następnie określenie, w jakim stopniu lekcje języka angielskiego w ostatnich klasach szkół średnich prowadzone są zgodnie z promowaną zasadą autonomii ucznia, i wreszcie ustalenie, czy uczniowie i nauczyciele wykorzystują potencjał autonomicznego uczenia się i nauczania, czy też ich priorytetem jest jedynie przygotowanie do zbliżającego się egzaminu. Wyniki badania dowodzą, że chociaż większość uczniów klas maturalnych posiada cechy autonomicznego ucznia, tzn. ma rozwinięte strategie metapoznawcze i poznawcze oraz jest świadoma swoich mocnych i słabych stron, to jednak w zdecydowanej większości przypadków rozwój autonomii napotyka na wiele przeszkód wynikających z niechęci lub braku świadomości samych nauczycieli oraz ograniczeń instytucjonalnych, takich jak programy nauczania czy wymogi egzaminacyjne.

Introduction

Nowadays, learner independence has been a highly relevant issue in Second Language (L2) pedagogy, especially due to the interest of the scientific community, as well as the current recommendations of the Council of Europe on the autonomy of the language learning process. Similarly to the acquisition of various skills, success in learning a foreign language involves taking responsibility for one's own learning process and going beyond the requirements set by the teacher (Pawlak 2017: 3). It is especially important for students to be aware that it is largely dependent on them how their learning progresses, while the teacher is expected to encourage them to act autonomously in this regard. The main objective of the research is to broaden the knowledge in the area of an autonomous language learning process, with particular emphasis on the approach to both English language learning and teaching in the final year of secondary school. After the theoretical introduction, the results of the research conducted by the author are presented. Having analysed the data gathered from over 100 respondents, the study is to determine not only whether Polish high school graduates have the characteristics of independent students, but also, in light of upcoming exams, the extent to which classes are conducted in accordance with the promoted principle of learner autonomy.

1. Literature review

1.1. The origins of autonomy in L2 learning and teaching

The evolving reality and the challenges that modern society is facing have contributed to the empowerment of the student in the teaching process, which is in line with the autonomy of the language learning process (Benson 2001; Little 2012). The concept of autonomy in language teaching emerged alongside the Council of Europe's project on the teaching of modern languages and has been one of the most relevant issues in both theory and practice of language teaching since the turn of the 21st century (Wiśniewska 2017: 86). Linguists have derived the very concept of autonomy from psychology, or more precisely from moral and political philosophy. As a result, the role of the learner and the process of individual learning were gradually becoming more and more important, as opposed to the sole teaching process, as has been the case until now. Consequently, also the role of motivation has gained in importance, followed by agency and identity (Norton 2000; Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001). Learner autonomy is not a new concept, yet it will continue to be one of the most intriguing issues in teaching methodology, as mentioned by many authors, including Holec (1981), or Little (1991). It is also certainly one of the most difficult challenges for Polish education.

1.2. Defining autonomy

The first widely spread and commonly accepted definition of autonomy was formulated by Henri Holec in 1981 who stated that learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981: 3). Since this ability is not inborn, he names two ways of acquiring it: firstly, by "natural" means or secondly, most frequently, by formal learning. He points out that "To take charge of one's learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Holec 1981: 3). However, Benson (2009: 18) remarks that this "ability" has not been described clearly enough and requires further elaboration. Both Macaro (1997: 168) and Adamson (2011: 198) focus primarily on the role of self-assessment, indicating that the ability mentioned by Holec can be acquired through understanding how to make decisions about oneself and through having the possibility of making those decisions. Choice is another important factor that emerges when trying to define autonomy. According to O'Brien and Guiney, "the more choices that you can make the less you need to depend upon the control or direction of others" (2001: 54). Further notable claims can be found in Allwright (1990: 10) as well as Benson and Cooker (2013: 8) who see autonomy as a social construct developing from interdependence. Having all this in mind, Carol Everhard (2012: 171) proposes defining autonomy as a "way of being or sense of self" which can be achieved thanks to collaborative learning decisions with access to internal and external resources. She

adds that the ability to exercise it relies on certain dispositions and predispositions and varies depending on the situation.

Over the years, the literature has provided many alternatives to Holec's definition. There are discussions whether learner autonomy should be considered as a capacity or behaviour; whether it is determined by the responsibility or control of the learner. Some specialists claim that autonomy is a psychological phenomenon with political implications, whereas others perceive it as a political right with psychological implications; and finally the questions arise whether complementary teacher autonomy affects the development of learner autonomy (Little 2003). Therefore, it seems inevitable that the concept of learner autonomy is likewise widely discussed in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). It is believed that such a concept empowers learners to be more active and become more efficient language learners (Rahman 2018: 231). Hui (2010) emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy in regard to language acquisition and claims that autonomy in SLA can only be fully implemented if the teacher ensures a supportive learning environment so that learners can overcome learning barriers when acquiring a language.

Benson (2009: 16–17) advocates the view that autonomy should be considered a complex, multi-faceted concept. He notes the range of associations with numerous forms of autonomy practice, among them individualized learning, self-instruction, distance learning, the use of authentic materials, language advising, learner and strategy training, collaborative learning, project work, negotiated syllabus, and more.

Certainly, autonomy needs to be perceived in a multidimensional way. In order to understand its complexity, the individual components of autonomy, such as motivation, self-esteem, or independence, must be identified and analysed thoroughly (Everhard 2015: 10). We also should not forget about the strategies which are considered key to autonomy. In foreign language didactics, strategies are defined as actions, behaviours, steps, and techniques that enhance the storage, recreation, and use of a foreign language or increase competence in its use (Kolber 2012: 155). Discovering strategies suitable for one's self allows students to be successful in language acquisition as well as in being able to manage learning situations outside the classroom, thus bringing the student closer to autonomy (Kolber 2012: 158). Effective L2 learners use a range of strategies for different tasks; they choose their strategies for a specific task depending on the requirements and specifics of that task. Among different kinds of learning strategies, the literature on SLA claims that metacognitive strategies play by far the most crucial role in effective language learning. Such strategies help learners regulate their own learning and effectively perform various language tasks in different contexts (Raoufi et al. 2014: 37). Metacognitive strategies are concerned with the regulation and management of learners' learning, which includes the following activities: deciding on the most applicable strategies for a given task; planning, monitoring, regulating, and evaluating learning. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, are related to the processes and strategies that actually

help us learn. More precisely, they focus on the mental processes and thinking skills that people involve themselves in every day, like memory, learning, problem solving, evaluation, reasoning, and decision making.

1.3. Autonomous learner

Since the main role in this study is played by the student's attitude towards learning, the characteristics of the autonomous learner require closer examination. Referring to the definition proposed by Holec (1981), an autonomous learner is characterized as having the ability to determine learning aims, define both contents and progression of their learning process, choose the most effective methods and techniques, adequately monitor the acquisition procedure (rhythm, time, place) and, finally, assess their own progress and achievements.

Bound (1988: 23) provides an even more detailed list of characteristics: autonomous learners take responsibility for their learning process, not just react to instructions. They take initiative in planning learning activities, find useful resources, and are selective when it comes to learning projects. They are not limited to the tasks and materials given by the teacher but learn outside the framework of educational institutions. In addition, autonomous learners reflect on the learning process, evaluate themselves but also work collaboratively with others. Klimas (2017: 21) points out that autonomous learners are aware of the learning goal and take responsibility for deciding when and how to learn. Moreover, they actively participate in all types of learning-related activities including goal setting, planning, task completion, as well as self-reflection and evaluation of learning. Finally, the autonomous learner decides when the learning process is complete.

All things considered; autonomy with regard to language education includes the ability to undertake, conduct, and evaluate one's own language education. Thus, an autonomous learner is a student with developed meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies who is aware of his/her strengths and weaknesses and preferences as regards the choice of learning strategies (Wilczyńska 2002: 54). To achieve success in language learning, the student must not only be involved during classes but, above all, must be aware that his/her process of language acquisition does not end in the classroom, but only begins there.

1.4. Teachers' role in developing learner autonomy

Experts state that the fundamental goal in teaching is to educate a self-directed and therefore independent life-long learner. In order to achieve this, there is no doubt that an appropriate tutor is needed who himself/herself exhibits autonomous characteristics (Bett 2004).

A modern teacher who wants to foster autonomy must go beyond the constraints of the educational system, which for many years has imposed on him or her the role of an instructor and expert, one of whose main tasks is to control the student. An autonomous teacher should perceive his or her learner as an independent, individual, and self-sufficient person. However, this does not mean that the role of the teacher is irrelevant in the educational process (Little 1991). On the contrary, the input and support of a teacher are vital and, through appropriate interaction in the classroom, they contribute to the development of student consciousness and independence (Dam 2000). The teacher should be a kind of counsellor, not an instructor or an oracle accepting different levels of autonomy for individual students (Wiśniewska 2001: 53–54). The teacher can be seen as a student support who wants to help and allows them to take responsibility for their own learning (Lamb 2008: 9).

A modern teacher, whose aim is to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom that fosters autonomy, should build and sustain a sense of learning community by ensuring harmonious, conflict-free, supportive, and cooperative relationships within the group. Secondly, the teacher should treat each student individually, focusing on the values that will be relevant to each member of the group and in case of a learner's failure, provide the necessary encouragement and support. It is also important to concentrate the learners' efforts on carrying out various projects and to foster a positive attitude towards changes and new challenges. Last but not least, teachers should foster the professional development of learners by providing access to knowledge while ensuring freedom and autonomy with regard to their language competence and organizational capacity (Opalka 2002: 90–91).

One cannot also ignore the fact that an autonomy-supportive teacher must exhibit autonomous qualities themselves. Teacher autonomy affects not only his/her motivation and job satisfaction, but most importantly his/her learning outcomes. Autonomous teachers reflect on their role as a teacher and are willing to adjust it if it can help their students become more autonomous (Lamb 2008: 278). Little, cited by Lamb, as well makes the point that it is only the autonomous teacher who can truly develop autonomy in their students; "it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner" (Little 2000: 45). He also adds that "teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning" (Little 2000: 45). As this quote implies, teacher autonomy is an indispensable element to evoking autonomous behaviour in others.

1.5. The benefits of an autonomous approach

Learner autonomy is a fundamental issue in foreign language education as the benefits it entails are well proven. Specialists claim that if learners are not aware of their responsibilities, they cannot succeed in learning new things. It is also said that learner autonomy, learner responsibility and motivation are always related with each other when it comes to successful language learning (Yagcioglu 2015: 428–429). The long-term goal of education is to build the potential for development, whether it is the personal development of the learner, the ability to find his or her place in social and professional life, the potential for teamwork or the ability to find solutions to problems that arise. To achieve this goal, education must be based on the principle of autonomy (Federowicz 2015: 14). The unquestionable benefit of an autonomous approach to teaching is an increase in student motivation, which leads to more efficient learning. Success in language learning and motivation are correlated, since a decline in learning effectiveness causes a decline in motivation (Iluk 2013: 67). To clarify, empirical research in the field of social psychology states, that “feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci 1995: 2) is a fundamental human need and autonomy is both the source and the motor of our intrinsic motivation. Transferring this knowledge to the field of L2 learning and teaching, it appears that autonomy solves the problem of motivation in language learning. Learners draw on their intrinsic motivation, the moment they accept responsibility for their own learning at the same time committing themselves to foster the ability to reflect independently. On the other hand, achieving success strengthens their sense of motivation. Since they are motivated, their learning is both more effective and efficient.

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013), most specialists now agree that motivation, autonomy, and learning outcomes are interrelated, thus creating a cyclical process (see Figure 1).

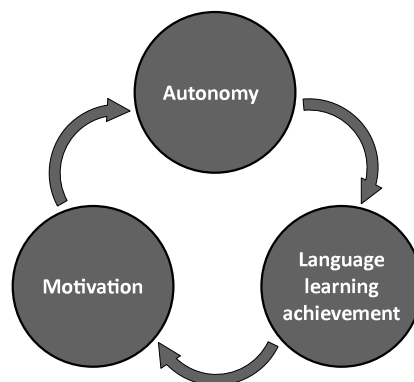


Figure 1. Cyclical process of motivation, autonomy, and achievement in EFL learning

Source: (Bravo et al. 2017: 102).

Another argument in favour of autonomy in second language acquisition is the fact that students who enjoy a high degree of autonomy should be able to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective spontaneous communication depends. Thanks to the autonomous approach, they are provided with more opportunities to communicate in a foreign environment. Finally, autonomy responds to the individual needs of students at all levels and has a lasting impact on them because of life-long learning skills as well as a habit of independent thinking (Jiao 2005) (Little 2003). Given the potential that an autonomous approach to learning holds, this study seeks to examine whether teachers actually take the effort to instruct in such a manner and whether learners exhibit the characteristics of autonomous students. In her study, the author limited the respondents to secondary school graduating students only as the question if examination requirements would overshadow all the benefit of autonomous approach motivated the study. Little has been published in the context of students facing the most significant final exam of their school years.

2. Methodology

The purpose of the study was to verify the hypotheses which assume that:

- Secondary school graduates are aware of their expectations, goals, strengths and weaknesses and know which learning conditions they prefer but at the same time tend to be reluctant when it comes to deciding on the scope of the material or negotiating the syllabus.
- On average, half of the learners try to solve language problems and develop language skills on their own, whereas the other half relies only on teacher's instruction and does not go beyond school requirements.

The next section of the research questions focuses on teachers' approaches to teaching. Most generally, the author aims to examine whether teachers conduct their classes in accordance with the promoted autonomy, assuming that:

- Teachers mostly do not practice teaching according to the idea of autonomy, place themselves in the role of the sole decisive person and do not encourage students to take initiative for their learning process.
- Moreover, it is expected that most teachers are unlikely to use materials other than the textbook and do not take advantage of the opportunities that technology provides.

Finally, the author verifies the hypothesis that teachers in secondary school graduating classes focus primarily on preparing students for the upcoming exam, whereas for senior year students, preparing for the final exam serves as a learning priority as well.

2.1. Participants

The respondents constituted a group of 105 secondary school graduates from 2020. They are pupils from different schools (high school and technical college) all over Poland. Over 98% of the respondents were female, 102 girls and only two of them were boys. The majority had been learning English for more than nine years (101 respondents), while the rest from five to eight or three to four years, 1.9% each respectively, equalling two respondents. The number of English classes per week varied from two hours to a maximum of six hours, with 5–6 hours per week being the largest group (50.5%). In an attempt to determine, at least to some extent, the level of English proficiency of the respondents, the author asked about the type of the final exam that they were taking. The results are as follows: 65 respondents decide on an advanced level of the final exam (B2), 38 on the basic level (B1) and two learners take the bilingual final exam (C1), representing less than two percent of respondents.

2.2. Instrument

After reviewing the existing research on the autonomous approach to learning and teaching English, the author did not find an ideal instrument that met all her requirements and could be applied to this study in its original form. Therefore, the author decided to create her own instrument, which is a questionnaire consisting of 22 closed questions supported by the quantitative method. Although questionnaires are often perceived as an easy way of gathering data, their benefits should not be ignored. First and foremost, they can reach a large number of participants from different geographical locations presenting various approaches and values. They can be economically administered at a relatively low cost and then simply administered and analysed (Dörnyei 2003). In the case of this study, it was also particularly important that the format was familiar to most respondents as they voluntarily devoted their free time to it.

The questionnaire included questions concerning characteristics and actions that characterize an autonomous student, as well as aspects related to the role of the teacher in the process of developing autonomy were taken into consideration. It is based on the literature related to Holec (1981), Benson (2007), Little (2003) and Wilczyńska (2002). In particular the inspiration was taken from a questionnaire designed by Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002), consisting of four sections, over 50 items in total. They were partly used and adapted in the author's questionnaire. However, the author decided to be much more selective, bearing in mind the risk of discouraging students from spending too much time on completing the survey.

The first section of the students' questionnaire asked for background information needed to statistically determine the profile of the respondents. The second section, designed to explore whether these students display characteristics of autonomous

learners, consisted of eight closed questions on a five-point Likert scale in which respondents specify their level of agreement to each statement in five points: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. There was one multiple choice question concerning the students' preferences in language learning and use at the end of this section. Third section and last nine questions were again on the same five-point scale, regarding the approach of English teachers to students and their teaching manner.

The questionnaire was prepared in the participants' native language as the author did not know what level of linguistic competence the respondents would have. Preparing it in Polish avoided comprehension problems and did not discourage learners with a weaker language level from completing the survey. After collecting the data, the author analysed the responses and held a discussion. The instrument used in this study was conducted sooner on a relatively small pilot group consisting of 15 high school students that the author was able to test on due to her work. The list of questions and statements used in this instrument is attached at the end of the article.

2.3. Analysis

A total of 22 questions were analysed. The author conducted descriptive statistical analysis for each question individually, referring to the measures of central tendency to determine the mean average of the responses as well as the standard deviation as a measure of variability. The ordinal data gathered was presented with the help of both bar and pie charts as well as tables. Both percentage results and exact numbers were provided. The research is therefore a quantitative analysis.

3. Results and discussion

The first question related to active participation in the classes shows that almost 47% of the respondents take an active part in English class, whereas slightly more than every third person remains neutral towards either side (35.2%). Only 7 out of 105 high school graduates are reported not to be involved while attending an English lesson at all, declaring 1 point on the scale which corresponds to the answer: strongly disagree.

What came as a surprise to the author are the responses to the statement about negotiating the syllabus. Students were asked to respond to the statement: I would like to have an impact on the choice of the material scope (textbook, article topics, discussions).

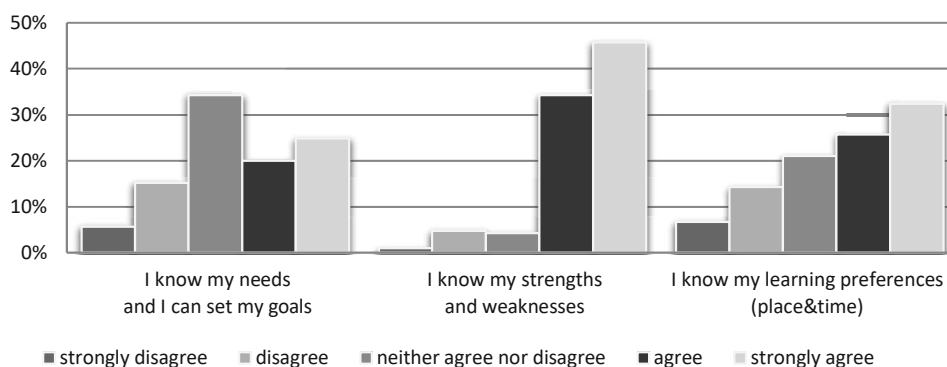
Table 1. Frequency and percentage of student responses regarding a negotiable syllabus

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Frequency	3	15	15	32	40
Percentage	2.9%	14.3%	14.3%	30.5%	38.1%

Source : Own elaboration.

As many as 68.8% of the students (32 agree and 40 respondents strongly agree) would like to negotiate the syllabus with the teacher. Respectively, 14.3% opted for two (disagree) or three points (neither agree nor disagree) on the scale, suggesting that they are not genuinely interested in actively participating in the selection of learning materials. Only three individuals have no interest in it at all. The mean average of the responses is 3.87 and it indicates that most students exhibit the characteristics of an autonomous learner in this respect that they want to have a real impact on what they learn.

As far as the typical qualities of an independent student are concerned, almost half of the high school graduates (44.8%) chose the answer suggesting that they know their needs and are able to define their goals. However, the most common single answer (36 answers = 34.3%) was the middle one, which indicates that students do not lean in either direction. What is more, the vast majority, namely 80%, are aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English. Here, the average score is 4.12 on a five-point scale of agreement. There is a large disproportion in the chart as only one person of the more than 100 participants of the questionnaire is completely incapable of defining his/her skills (standard deviation [SD] = 3.12). When it is a matter of defining the environment for the most effective learning (time and place), the responses also suggest that students are aware of their personal preferences, as illustrated in the chart.

**Figure 2. Autonomous learner qualities**

Source: Own elaboration.

The next statement that learners were asked to comment on was: I try to solve the language problems I encounter on my own (e.g., I look up a new word, grammatical structures). Thirty respondents (28.8%) agree, and 29 (27.9%) strongly agree with this statement. Only 2.9% of the respondents (3 individuals) do not show initiative in checking the meaning of a foreign word or a new grammatical structure. Just over 23% of learners (24 respondents) remain neutral in this respect. The mean is here 3.63. The results also reveal that students devote their free time to learning English (more than 35% strongly agree, 24.8% agree), which means that in addition to the obligatory material, they also acquire English in other ways, for example by watching films or reading books in English, or by repeating the material during the vacations, and more. Only nine respondents (8.6%) do not agree at all and 16 (15.2%) do not agree. Eighteen respondents, so just over 17%, place themselves in the middle of the scale. This suggests that besides the compulsory school material, students are rather eager to deepen their knowledge outside the school curriculum.

The answers given by high school graduates so far indicate that most of them exhibit the characteristics of an autonomous learner. In the light of the above, it seems surprising that students do not agree with the statement: During classes, I try to use only English (asking questions, working in a group, etc.). The mean response is 2.36, so most closely to answer "I disagree". The answers show that only 5 out of 105 respondents agree entirely, and 9 agree. The rest, that is 89 people, representing almost 85% of the survey participants, use their mother tongue during English classes. This seems to be surprising, as in the previous statement it could be seen that a greater proportion of students show the characteristics of autonomous learners.

During classes I try to use English only

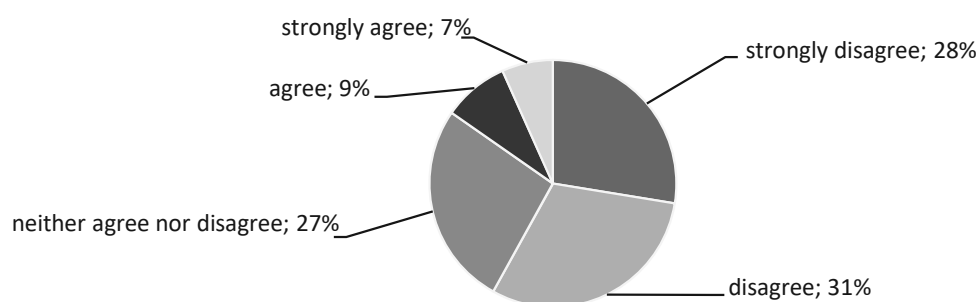


Figure 3. Declared use of English in the classroom

Source: Own elaboration.

In the above statement, it is clearly evident that the vast majority do use Polish, which is, however, contrary to the proclaimed autonomy. A possible explanation for this phenomenon may be the fact that the teacher does not expect learners

to use English in the lesson, so they do not feel obliged to do so and adjusts his or her behaviour to the lesson.

In the following questions, the objective was to examine the extent to which the English teachers in the final grades conduct their classes in accordance with the current recommendations of the Council of Europe and thus how far they are promoting the principle of student autonomy. As the high school graduates' answers demonstrate, English teachers are unlikely to encourage their students to become proactive in their own learning process. Students do not feel sufficiently motivated or provided with individual advice or guidance from the tutor. More than half of the respondents (54.3% representing 57 responses) have a negative opinion of their teacher in this respect, 17.1% (18 respondents) are neutral, while not even one-third of the students (28.3% representing 30 responses) feel properly encouraged by their teacher to influence their learning process.

Answers to the next statement: "The teacher uses various additional materials (not only the course book)" do not show any clear tendency either (Table 2, Figure 4). At this point, the mean is exactly 3, so it is neutral. Moreover, no trend or deviation is seen in the responses: each level of agreement received approximately equal numbers of votes, from the most 26 responses to the least 16 responses.

Table 2. Teacher's use of additional materials during classes

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Frequency	26	18	16	20	25
Percentage	24.8%	17.1%	15.2%	19%	23.8%

Source: Own elaboration.

The teacher uses various additional materials

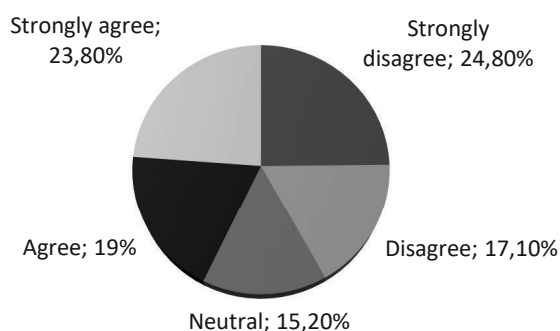


Figure 4. The use of additional materials

Source: Own elaboration.

However, when it comes to the use of new technologies that require Internet access during classes or homework, it can be seen (Figure 5) that they are hardly ever used (22.9%), or practically not at all (51.4%).

New technologies requiring Internet access are used

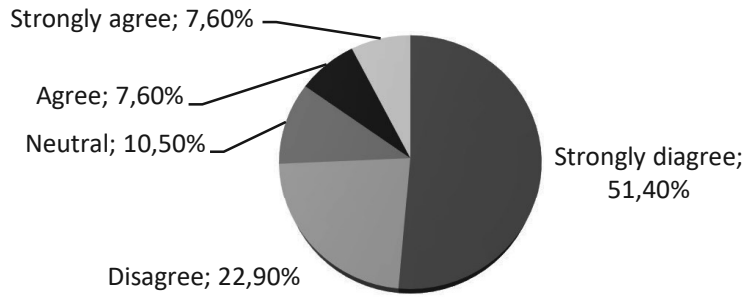


Figure 5. The use of new technologies
Source: Own elaboration.

The next statements investigated the participation of high school graduates in negotiating the syllabus, materials, or techniques used during classes (Figure 6). The first of them concerned the possibility of making decisions on different topics and verifying whether teachers give high school graduates the opportunity to discuss and implement their own ideas. As demonstrated in the theoretical part, adapting topics and materials to group preferences is an important factor in developing autonomy. However, the vast majority of students (57.7%) strongly disagree that they have the opportunity to make such decisions even from time to time. The situation is similar when negotiating homework, choosing different exercises, or work techniques. Only individual voices of around seven percent indicate that the teacher applies an autonomous approach.

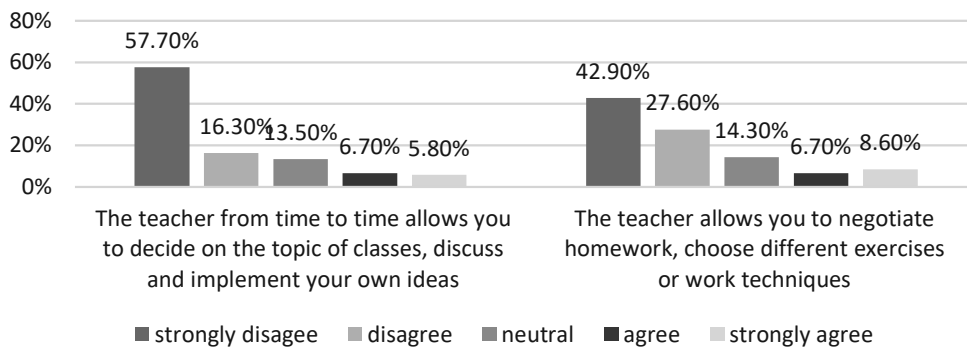


Figure 6. Student's influence of syllabus negotiation
Source: Own elaboration.

Following the above, students were asked to mark on a scale the extent to which they agreed with the following statements:

S1: The teacher retains the traditional roles of teacher > student, treating himself or herself an authority who “always knows better”,

S2: The teacher tries to approach each student individually,

S3: The teacher creates a friendly atmosphere during classes, is patient, and shows empathy.

The results (Figure 7) ranged from 15.2% to a maximum of 23.8% of the total number of votes for each response. The mean in S1 = 3.03, S2 = 2.83 and S3 = 3.2. One notes that there is no individual level of agreement with the highest or lowest number of responses that stands out (standard deviation being close to 2). Only in the last question, a rather more positive picture of the teacher’s attitude can be observed. Namely, 30 respondents strongly agree with that statement, 18 agree, and the other three options got 19 votes each.

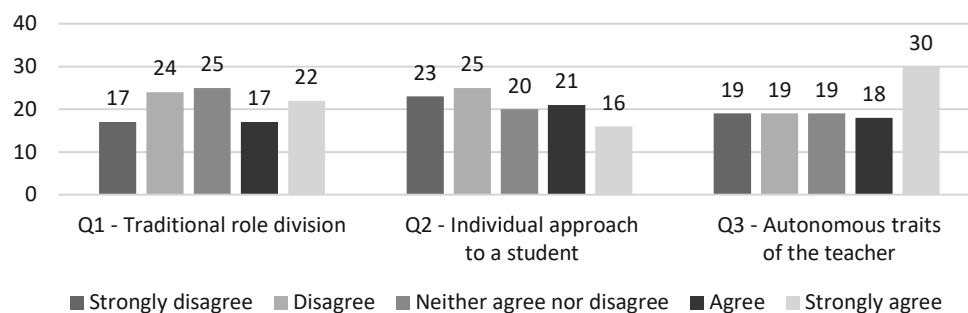


Figure 7. Frequency of answers considering the role division, teachers’ approach to a student and their characteristics

Source: Own elaboration.

As the results show, teachers in the vast majority do not follow the promoted autonomy. Cichoń (2004: 333) has already emphasized that in addition to cognitive styles, learning strategies and techniques, future teachers need to be provided with knowledge about learning systems that already function in full autonomy or semi-autonomy.

The last two questions, which need to be analysed and discussed, are closely related to the attitudes of the high school graduates who were intentionally selected for this study. They aimed to find out what is of most importance to students in English lessons who are soon facing one of the most important exams in their education. Using multiple choice questions, the author asked whether they want to focus solely

on preparing for the final exam (which partly contradicts the principle of autonomous learning as it promotes the concept of lifelong learning rather than just preparation to achieve a specific result on exams), whether they want to learn the language for everyday use or maybe whether both aspects are relevant to them. It turned out that the priority in senior year for most students (47.6% representing 50 respondents) is only to prepare for an upcoming exam. Just a little less, because almost 42% of the respondents were in favour of both goals they want to achieve being equally important and finally, acquiring the language itself was chosen by a mere 10.5% of high school graduates, which corresponds to 11 research participants. As the results of the survey suggest, for almost half of the students in the survey, the vision of the upcoming final exam does not encourage them to learn the language as such, but rather to master exam-related skills. The aim of passing the final exams overshadows, in a way, an autonomous approach to learning, but this does not mean that it excludes them completely. On the other hand, as regards the statement that the teacher only focuses on preparing the class for the Matura exam, according to the students' answers, 23% completely agree, 19% agree, 35% remain neutral and 23% do not agree with this statement. This indicates that 41% of the teachers focus exclusively on preparation for the final exam and on obtaining good results by the high school graduates, while neglecting the acquisition of the language as such.

Referring to the statistics above, the average response on the survey oscillates around 3.05 points on a five-point agreement scale. It is worth noting the statement about being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses concerning learning English [statement 1 on the graph] where the mean rating is visibly higher, i.e. 4.19 (SD is 1.14), so learners agree with this statement considerably more as compared to the rest. A relatively larger variance is also observed in the statement regarding the students being allowed to decide on a lesson topic or implement their own ideas [statement 2 on the graph], where the mean is 1.86 (close to strongly disagree/disagree) with an SD to the mean for the entire survey at 1.19 (see Figure 8).

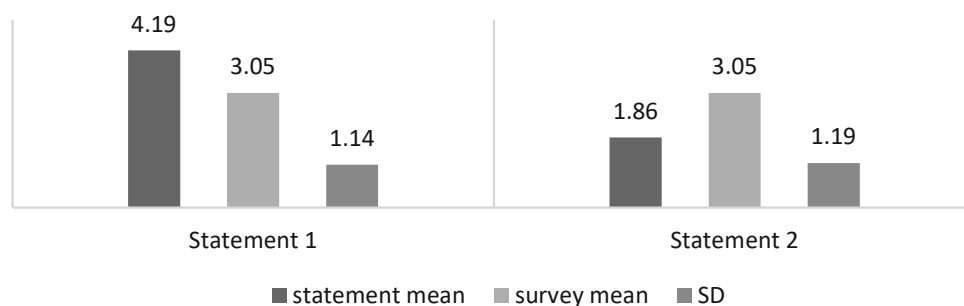


Figure 8. Most deviating statements from the average – comparison

Source: Own elaboration.

The results of the study positively validate one part of first hypothesis made by the author, that is that most of high school graduates are autonomous as they are aware of their expectations, goals, strengths and weaknesses, and they know what learning conditions they prefer. However, it turned out that the most of the respondents do want to have an influence on the scope of the material and negotiating the syllabus which is contrary to the hypothesis assumed.

What came as a surprise for the author was that 58% of survey participants try to solve the language problems they encounter on their own and a large majority, representing 61% of respondents learns the language independently. These results prove the above hypothesis to be wrong as the average response rate referring to independent problem solving is 3.38 and 3.65 when it comes to learning on one's own. According to the Likert-scale used, this indicates that most students are autonomous in these aspects.

The first hypothesis concerning teachers is strongly confirmed by the students' answers. The mean response is 2.1 which means that students do not agree with the statement that teachers allow students to negotiate homework, choose different exercises or work techniques, while for the statement that from time to time teachers give students an opportunity to decide on the topic of the lesson, and discuss and implement their own ideas, the mean response is 1.86, corresponding somewhere between strongly disagree (1) and disagree (2). This result indicates that the autonomous approach to teaching is practically non-existent in this respect.

Moreover, the survey analysis indicates that on average, students can say neither yes nor no when it comes to teachers' use of additional materials. But the average response regarding the use of modern technology by the teacher is at the level of 1.97 (close to 2 – disagree) which positively verifies the next hypothesis.

Finally, the students' average response indicates that most teachers in the high school graduating class only focus on preparation for the final exam which positively prove part of the last hypothesis. However, for 47.6% of the respondents, which is just under half, exam preparation is a priority. According to the results, somewhat but still a little more than 50% of students point to language acquisition or both language acquisition and preparation for the upcoming exam as the most important educational goal in their senior year of secondary school.

Conclusions

The objective of the study was, first of all, to determine whether Polish high school graduates have the characteristics of independent students, secondly, the extent to which classes are conducted according to the promoted principle of student autonomy and, thirdly, to assess if both students and teachers take advantage of the potential of autonomous teaching or whether their priority is just to prepare

for the upcoming exam. Based on the above findings, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. Most of the students in the senior year classes have the qualities of an autonomous learner. They tend to participate actively in the classes, want to negotiate the syllabus, know their language needs, are aware of both their strengths and weaknesses as well as of the fact that learning only at school is not sufficient.
2. English classes are unlikely to be conducted based on the principle of autonomy. Teachers do not use new technologies as well as students' influence on the syllabus is hardly noticeable. As for the teacher's attitude (retraining the traditional division of roles, individual approach, empathy), there is no clear trend here.
3. The desire to take responsibility for the process of language learning in the final grade is rather disregarded, and the actions taken by both students and teachers are subordinated to achieving the practical goal of passing the Matura exam.

This leads to the conclusion that, in most cases, developing autonomy will encounter many difficulties due to the reluctance or lack of awareness of teachers themselves and, above all, institutional constraints such as curricula or examination requirements.

All in all, it is essential for those involved in education at every phase to understand that learning useful skills and developing autonomy will contribute significantly to enhancing the quality of learning. There is a famous proverb which says that if you give a man a fish he'll eat for a day but if you teach him to fish you'll feed him for a lifetime and it seems to perfectly illustrate the idea of autonomy in foreign language teaching. The aim of teaching should not be to provide ready-made knowledge for future exams, but to support learners, encourage independence, and promote a lifelong desire to learn.

A limitation of this study was certainly the relatively small sample of respondents, who came only from Poland and were mostly females. Future research needs to include analysing a larger number of men's responses as well as examine how this applies to different cultures. In addition, future research could also qualitatively investigate the analysed issue in order to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons for decisions and to comprehensively analyse the most interesting and complex cases.

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Instrument of the study

Sekcja 1: Informacje podstawowe

1. Płeć
2. Ilość godzin języka angielskiego w szkole w tygodniu
3. Jak długo uczysz się języka angielskiego (w latach)
4. Do jakiej matury z języka angielskiego przystępujesz?

Sekcja 2 : Autonomiczność polskich maturzystów

1. Na zajęciach z języka angielskiego: staram się w nich aktywnie uczestniczyć
2. Chciał(a)bym mieć wpływ na wybór zakresu materiału (podręcznik, tematy artykułów, dyskusji)
3. Wiem czego potrzebuję, ucząc się języka, i potrafię wyznaczać sobie cele
4. Znam swoje mocne i słabe strony, jeśli chodzi o znajomość języka angielskiego
5. Wiem kiedy, jak i gdzie najłatwiej przychodzi mi nauka
6. Staram się samodzielnie rozwiązywać napotykanne problemy językowe (np. sprawdzam nowe słowo, struktury gramatyczne).
7. Uczę się języka nie tylko gdy to konieczne (oglądając filmy, czytając książki, w wakacje itp.)
8. Na zajęciach staram się używać wyłącznie języka angielskiego (zadając pytania, pracując w grupie itp.)

9. W klasie maturalnej na lekcji angielskiego najważniejsze jest dla mnie: a) przygotowanie się do egzaminu maturalnego b) przyswojenie języka (do użytku codziennego, podróżując, w pracy itp.) c) obie opcje

Sekcja 3: Realizacja autonomicznego nauczania w klasach maturalnych przez nauczycieli

1. Nauczyciel języka angielskiego zachęca do przejęcia inicjatywy za własny proces nauczania (motywuje, doradza)
2. Nauczyciel korzysta z różnych dodatkowych materiałów (nie tylko z podręcznika)
3. Na zajęciach lub w zadaniach domowych wykorzystywane są nowoczesne metody nauki wymagające dostępu do Internetu (np. Kahoot)
4. Nauczyciel co jakiś czas daje możliwość decydować uczniom o tematyce zajęć, daje możliwość dyskusji i realizacji własnych pomysłów
5. Nauczyciel pozwala na negocjowanie pracy domowej, umożliwia wybór różnych ćwiczeń lub technik pracy
6. Nauczyciel zachowuje tradycyjny podział ról nauczyciel > uczeń, traktując się jako autorytet, który „zawsze wie lepiej”
7. Nauczyciel stara się podchodzić do każdego ucznia indywidualnie
8. Nauczyciel stwarza przyjazną atmosferę na zajęciach, jest cierpliwy i wykazuje się empatią
9. W klasie maturalnej nauczyciel skupia się jedynie na przygotowaniu nas do matury (arkusze, ćwiczenia pod egzamin)

Biogram

Magdalena Toporek – absolwentka studiów magisterskich na kierunku lingwistyka stosowana. Obecnie doktorantka w Szkole Doktorskiej Nauk Humanistycznych i Społecznych Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego w dyscyplinie językoznawstwo. Jej zainteresowania badawcze koncentrują się wokół dydaktyki języków obcych, autonomicznego podejścia do nauki i nauczania oraz pojęcia sukcesu.