Fostering Autonomous Learning in a University Context: Self-Study Activities and the Language Tutor's Role in Language Centres

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This paper focuses on the issue of learner's autonomy within the language learning process in a university context. Based on the experience of the Unical Language Centre, the paper outlines the evolution of the didactic organization of the Centre and the guidelines adopted to increase the effectiveness of self-study activities. Some aspects of the meta-cognitive sphere will be analysed, as well as the organization of the didactic resources available on the website.

Special focus will be given to the learning environment itself and its influence on the learning process. Finally, some attention will be devoted to the human resources involved in the process, in particular the language tutors.

1. The University of Calabria Language Centre: the learning environment and services provided

Since Holec (1981), a plethora of definitions has been provided as for the concept of learners' autonomy. Despite the lack of a single and universal theory, Hurd (2005) highlights the fact that autonomy can take a variety of forms depending on learners' characteristics, but also on the learning context. According to Brown, context can be defined as

> the formal or informal setting in which a situation occurs; it can include many aspects or dimensions, such as environment, social activity, goals or tasks of groups and individuals; time (year/month/day). (Brown 2010: 7)

The environment itself entails a number of different physical features (temperature, air conditioning, pathways, outdoor spaces, colors and ceiling height). Earthman (2004), among the others, rates temperature, heating and air quality as the most important elements for students' achievements.

This paper will concentrate on the multimedia labs of the Unical Language Centre and the different services provided, particularly within the OLA (Offerta Linguistica d'Ateneo) context.

The Unical Language Centre is located in two buildings, known as 'cubes': each one

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has a large multimedia lab, equipped with computers and internet connection, where self-study activities take place. Both language laboratories are examples of Self Access Learning Centres (SACS) (Harmer 2001), more specifically of SACS where semi-guided learning is implemented. The idea behind the creation of multimedia labs at Unical was to set up common spaces where different types of users (mainly students of any age and degree courses, but also administrative, technical and teaching staff) could gather and study languages using the internet, at their own pace, on the basis of individual interests and of their own skills.

> The idea of a self-access centre is that students should drop into either as a regular part of a timetable or in their own spare time. Some students may not actually be following a regular course, but may have signed up to be allowed to use the SAC even if they are not in any English class. (Harmer 2001: 340)

The person who is entitled to guide them over a number of different self-study resources is the 'language tutor' (LT), whose role will be illustrated later, together with a focus on the websites available on the 'CLA Unical' portal.

In both Language Centre buildings the user is welcomed by a warm atmosphere, with coloured walls and small green and yellow waiting seats. Each room where lessons take place is named after a colour, thus breaking the usual university trend of naming rooms with letters or numbers. Inside the labs, the computers are arranged in rows where students sit next to each other, helping them feel more comfortable and socialize in a homely and cozy atmosphere.

In addition to tutor-assisted self-study activities in the multimedia labs, the Centre offers other services to University students and staff and to the territory as well, such as conversation with a tutor in the language requested, paper revision, translation of articles, interpreting service, guided school visits and guidance meetings for high school students, training courses for school teachers, courses and exams for international certifications.

2. The OLA context: an overview of the guidelines

The language laboratories and the Unical Language Centre have been working on a new system of language courses called OLA (Offerta Linguistica di Ateneo). The project started in 2008 with the aim to offer basic English for Academic Purposes courses to a limited number of degree courses (at the end of the course students are expected to reach a B1 lower level according to the CEFR. The number of students involved has grown steadily since then and the project has now been expanded to other European languages.

2.1 *Self-study activities within the OLA context*

The learning path includes ten mandatory hours of assisted self-study in the language

labs and twenty unassisted hours of self-study at home (also compulsory, with a written report to be submitted to the tutors). Tutors welcome learners and give them academic guidance, as well as a kind of psychological support in order to address them in their learning process. Learners may choose to which extent they are willing to be self-directed or tutor-dependent.

Therefore, the ten hours of tutor-assisted self-study take place in the laboratories. At the beginning of the English course, a LT visits classes illustrating the guidelines and the resources students are supposed to use. Every student must register on the CLA website in order to book a computer for the lab hours.

The language laboratories are an example of the implementation and practice of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Levy defined CALL as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (Levy 1997: 1).

This approach has proved to be a very effective way of fostering language learning in a university context: students who come make themselves at ease and try to make the most of the time they spend inside the lab; they often feel that studying on a computer is not boring, or it is perceived as an unconventional way of learning that they prefer to more traditional ones. The computer can serve as a tutor which offers language activities or skill practice; as a stimulus for discussion and interaction to generate analysis, critical thinking, discussion and writing; or as a tool for writing and research. Accordingly, our labs allow students to access a portal which provides links to free websites. In this context, the Internet is used as a source of limitless authentic material.

3. Accessing free websites on the CLA Unical platform: selection criteria and literature

The resources available on our portal have been selected analysing students' needs and in the perspective of a lifelong learning path, in order to foster the pursuit of knowledge for either personal or academic goals. Given the great availability of resources for language learning on the Internet, the most suitable free websites, considered reliable and up-to-date, have been selected for learners. Some guidelines have been provided in order to let students discover their uses and potentialities by themselves. The selection criteria are the following:

a. Variety of target levels – There are resources available for absolute beginners, as well as others addressed to advanced learners (they cover all levels from A1 to C2).

b. Variety of purpose – Though some websites are meant to offer complete courses, others focus on specific language skills and features (e.g. listening, reading, grammar, authentic materials, ESP). This makes them suitable for learners' different objectives.

c. Variety of approach – According to Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 2011), it is important to give each learner the chance to find their 'way into' language by the means of using resources suitable to their own learning preferences. Some websites are then more remarkably visual in their arrangement of contents, others

are more traditionally sequenced and logical, others focus on voice, sound and music. The students are encouraged to explore and try different resources, until they become aware of their learning preferences.

Currently, the CLA portal contains about 70/80 links to websites; all the resources are periodically revised, after collecting users' feedback, and at times some websites are replaced by others. The grouping of these websites is based on the skills students aim to improve (e.g. listening, vocabulary, reading comprehension, getting ready for a written exam) or on the content (grammar, vocabulary, videos and songs). All websites help students enrich their vocabulary, in particular some of them offer activities and games specifically designed to improve and expand lexis. The resources also include online dictionaries and pronunciation tools, authentic materials from great broadcasts such as BBC or VOA, links to online newspapers (Guardian, Economist and others), specific practice for language certifications (Cambridge, IELTS) and academic exam samples.

3.1 *Introducing students to the resources: how to get them started*

In a tutor assisted self-study context, students' involvement is crucial. Students must be aware of their own limits and strengths, and able to set realistic goals, devising learning strategies according to their own pace and needs. Autonomy is also based on a willingness of the learners to take the responsibility for their own learning process and the confidence in their ability.

Though students take a formal placement test, it is important they familiarize with the CEFR to become able to assess their level. Most students hardly have an idea of what the CEFR is, or know how much the time factor is important to reach a certain level. Therefore, awareness, perseverance, motivation and responsibility are fundamental. Hence, they are guided through this process by the LT.

On their first day in the lab, the LT welcomes them and makes them at ease while they listen to a comprehensive introduction to the multimedia resources available on the portal.

The overview of the resources is usually divided into two main parts, studying tips and sample websites. The advice tutors give students in order to make the most of autonomous learning includes the importance of being patient and taking the time they need throughout the language learning process, the relevance of varying the activities and resources as much as possible, of keeping track of all the new vocabulary day by day and the search for a personal approach to language learning.

In order to become autonomous learners, students must first be conscious of what kind of learners they are and what their role in the learning process is. Most importantly, they have to assume responsibility of their own performance. From a theoretical point of view, metacognition literally refers to "thinking about the process of knowing or simply thinking about thinking", i.e. a "higher order thinking which involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning." (Livingston 1997).

According to Holec (1981: 3), "the first step towards autonomy is the acceptance

of responsibility of onÈs own learning." Indeed, when new students of any level or background enters the language lab, they immediately realize that, whether or not they want to become business managers, what they will have to achieve at the end is the role of "manager of their learning" (Holec 1987: 147). That is, choosing resources according to their level, needs and preferences, managing their learning throughout an unlimited time-span.

The next step is showing some of the multimedia resources available on the portal. Students usually get an overview of just a few websites, each focusing on a different skill, and are encouraged to explore as many as they can.

Finally, students take their seat, knowing that LTs are always available for explanations, doubts and questions, technical problems and so on. Tutors move around the computers to have a look at what everyone is doing, without being intrusive.

Self-study activities are based on the assumption that learners must not be left to their own devices or learning in isolation, reducing the learning process to a set of notions to be acquired. Fostering autonomous learning means that the LT and the learner co-build autonomy by creating a friendly environment characterized by low anxiety, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others and self-improvement as a goal.

4. The Language Tutor

There are some major differences between the role of a LT and that of a class teacher. LTs are in most cases:

a. Rather young

Age is one of the factors that makes students see the LTs closer to them than they perceive class instructors; this feeling of common background or belonging makes it easier to build a relationship based on confidence and trust. In addition, the student feels more confident and relaxed, since the LTs are not supposed to judge or mark the student in any way, and inclined to trust them and listen to their advice.

Moreover, LTs keep a vivid memory of having been learners of ESL/EFL. This means they can predict problems and difficulties and help devising the proper strategies to overcome them; know the 'bugs' that affect the L1/L2 relation, i.e. can make the most of contrastive analysis. This generates a sort of mutual identification between the student and the LT that has several positive consequences. The student sees the LT as an example of successful learner, who has managed to build the proper autonomy and study skills. If LTs have an encouraging attitude, reporting their experience and showing students that anything can be done with the proper time and strategies, the students will be willing to undertake the same learning paths, because they will believe in their effectiveness.

b. Know how to use the resources

This is perhaps the most important skill of the LTs. Being the ones who are in charge of researching, selecting and updating the learning resources, and also using them daily

as a working tool, LTs know better than anyone else their content, peculiarities and suitability for different purposes, and can then suggest students what to use according to their objectives, needs, starting conditions. Furthermore, the daily use and exploration of the websites become a sort of perpetual training for the LT.

4.1 The roles of a LT

The LT plays many different roles in a language lab, at the same time similar and different to those a teacher covers in class. Borrowing some of the roles proposed by Harmer (2001: 57-66), we can affirm that the LT is at the same time:

a. A Facilitator

Rather than a transmitter of knowledge, the LT acts like a resource available at need, not necessarily following a lesson plan addressed to a predefined number and target of students. In a word, the LT is extremely flexible. This attitude tends to stimulate students' autonomy, since they are aware of the responsibility implied in their choices and in the concentration they need to carry out the tasks they choose. However, the presence and availability at need of a LT reassures students and makes them feel more confident and relaxed. Then, the LT's job is literally to make things 'easier' than they are perceived at first by an often-scared student.

b. A Controller

Probably the least pleasant part of the job but of crucial importance. The LT is in charge of the functioning of all the activities that take place in the language labs, for both didactic and practical aspects. Though not formally responsible for the safety of the people and the equipment of the laboratories, the LT helps making things work, fixing small technical problems in strict collaboration and communication with the technical staff. Moreover, the LT is in charge of the recording of all the self-study activities taking place in the language lab on a given day. This implies updating the electronic register with the detail of the activities, checking students in and out, verifying reservations, certifying the fulfillment of the assignments, solving sudden bureaucratic problems (in strict cooperation with the teaching and administrative staff). From the didactic point of view, the LT must make sure everyone knows what they are required or expected to do (assignments), what they need (needs analysis), what they can do and how to do it (illustration of the resources suitable for the different aspects and needs), giving explanations and answers when required.

Having to deal with up to 40/50 students per hour, it appears evident that one of the main features necessary to work as a LT is an incredible amount of patience and a considerable ability in communication and in social skills. This defines the LT as a 'human resource' in all the possible meanings of the term.

c. A Prompter

The key task of the tutor is to motivate and encourage the students, whatever their background or however low their level is, so that they set out on the road of learning. This task is extremely delicate, dealing with key issues such as motivation, confidence, self-esteem, learning preferences and affectivity in general. The LTs encourage students by

giving clear and simple explanations, remarking progresses, suggesting strategies and practices to solve problems and overcome difficulties, making students feel comfortable and making the lab a homely place. Very often, especially in case of remedial teaching or recovery tutorials, LTs must help the students deal with failure, which however despicable is quite common in a university context. Furthermore, the LT gives clues on how to deal with the continuous pressure, stress and anxiety that many students lament; can help them manage their energies and their time.

5. Future perspectives

This paper has aimed to describe how the Language Centre of the University of Calabria has been working to help students develop autonomous learning. It illustrates the role of the LT and how it provides fertile conditions influencing students' confidence, awareness and responsibility. Further research and investigations are currently being carried out, concerning for instance the effectiveness of the practice here described, by analysing the trend in the results of the exams, as well as students' approval of the self-study activities, collecting their feedback through questionnaires.

Other issues would deserve deeper analysis, such as the changes and advantages this methodology offers from the point of view of organisation and management of language teaching in a University context. And further attention should be devoted to the role of the LT; far from being an alternative to traditional teaching, tutor-assisted activities offer an extraordinary integration of the class work. Of course, this implies great attention to the selection and training of human resources; LTs must be highly skilled and qualified personnel, they must possess at least a C1 in English – a level only recently required to mainstream EFL school teachers. They usually also have post-degree titles or certificates related to teaching foreign languages.

Finally, it is useful to remark that the adjective 'human' is inevitably a reference to a methodology concerned with the affective side of learning. The action of a LT is mainly focused on learner's needs, with the purpose of fighting negative feelings such as anxiety, fear and stress. Hence, the importance of a comfortable environment and a friendly atmosphere inside the language lab. If students are relaxed and positive, the affective filter will be lowered (Krashen 1982) and the learning process will automatically be easier and faster.

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