

Enhancing Autonomous Language Learning in Digital Environments- Paving the Way for Self-Learning via Escape Rooms and Communities of Practice

Ioana MUDURE-IACOB

„Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract. *The potential offered by digital tools and apps in the ESP teaching/ learning process encouraged both teachers and learners to explore the affordances of such learning instruments in synchronous and asynchronous contexts. However, faced with the new scenario of shifting instruction entirely in a digital format, the conventional use of pedagogical and didactic methods and approaches was put under scrutiny. New learning needs and more customised employability skills are deemed necessary for learners, digital natives who prove availability and high interest in exploring and playing with the wide array of digital tools. The manner in which ESP teachers can exploit such readiness and, at the same time, use the resourceful digital apps is by building on learner autonomy, so as to expand language learning beyond the virtual walls of class instruction. To do so, there is a stringent need to boost learner motivation through gamified learning experiences, to facilitate resourceful digital interactions in micro-communities of practice and to allow learners to use peer assessment as a self-improvement mechanism. Teacher assistance along the process, regarding choice of digital tasks, collaboration within communities of practice and reciprocal multimodal training will this way redesign the digital ESP class and provide it a more practical pedagogical foundation.*

Keywords: *autonomous learning, gamified learning, communities of practice, employability skill needs, digital escape rooms.*

Introduction

Language learning and teaching, as a dynamic and ongoing mechanism of acquiring skills, bears the tremendous advantage of allowing both learners and educators to use creativity with regards to the manner in which didactic planning, design of contents and delivery methods should be blended. There are hardly any rigid learning/teaching patterns or constraints regarding the learning resources and environments, which enables learners to achieve a high level of autonomy. Paired with the recent shift of learning languages in an entirely digital format, students and teachers alike found the affordances granted by this educational domain to be virtually unlimited. However, learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning¹ has become a need rather than an additional approach to learning, paving the way for new conundrums.

Referring to educational values, one may observe that the current initiatives to improve the educational system take into consideration not only the increase in school performance but also the students' education by means

¹ H. Holec, *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*, Oxford, Pergamon, 1981, p. 3.

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of establishing collaboration relations, raising self-esteem, and practicing common sense.²

Having been exposed to the synchronous and asynchronous facets of instruction, learners were granted significantly more authority in projecting and designing individual study and autonomous practice. Moreover, in the context of learning ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in a digital format, there is also the challenge of having to adapt and customise language teaching/learning so as to cater for contemporary employability needs. Particularly, for such online learners, who are digital natives, tailoring language learning demands a complex process of creating interactive educational content, enabling autonomy in the learning process and designing assessment that validates the destination point of their learning trajectory, that is, to use language in specific working contexts.

Digital natives’ readiness to explore the knowledge input that instructors provide during synchronous ESP classes is a vast opportunity to consider in the didactic planning stage, but it can also be challenging given the variety of tools and methods necessary to design proper learning sequences. “The tech revolution has launched the challenge of online learning, where learning office methods make the students more responsible, being liable for choosing a study domain at the beginning of the day. In such a learning environment, one has the right to choose the means of improving learning, to set personal learning objectives, to select the materials prepared in this area.”³

It is thus the purpose of this study to explore and investigate how digital learner autonomy can be supported throughout the acquisition and practice of communicative skills, by blending particular online tools, didactic scenarios and interactive sequences in the virtual learning environment. Some of the exemplified autonomous learning modules and sequences have been successfully implemented throughout the academic year 2020/2021, with undergraduate students enrolled in ESP classes at Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca and can serve as good practice scenarios for further blended learning sequences.

Building learner autonomy in ESP learning

In order to motivate ESP learners to pursue an independent learning path in parallel to class instruction (on site or online) teachers must design various alternative communication contexts in which autonomy is the key element. Being a skill that is easily transferable to the employability set of skills, autonomy in learning grants students the motivation to use and test their

² Adriana Denisa Manea, „Educational Values within the Scope of the Technological Revolution,” in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 14, p. 31-37.

³ Adriana Denisa Manea, Ion Albulescu, Cristian Stan, “Student Learning”, in *Education, Reflection, Development (8th edition). The European proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2020, p. 2.

acquired language skills in contexts that are unfamiliar to them and which require creativity and spontaneous reactions in non-instructional communication scenarios. Given that the process of becoming an autonomous language user means being recurrently exposed to learning contexts outside the traditional onsite or digital classroom, drilling, recycling of vocabulary and grammar structures along with a constant use of speaking skills become prerequisite instruments.

Referring to Littlewood's definition of autonomy, as "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently about their study"⁴ there are some factors that need to be considered when planning ESP lesson sequences and even a syllabus in which learner autonomy plays a significant part. Firstly, **teacher assistance** must be properly managed and not weakened, since learners are likely to lose motivation when being empowered to take control of their own learning. Closely related to motivation, autonomy is the product of empowerment, which implies at least two entities enabling the transfer of power and roles: the instructor, on one hand, whose roles modify progressively, and the learner, on the other hand, who takes control, to a certain extent, of their own learning objectives and targets. Voller⁵ exemplifies three steps that are meant to lead to autonomy: teacher's transfer of control to the learner, negotiation with learners as a feature that is defining for teaching, and respectively self-monitoring of the teaching act in order to identify the types and specific character of interactions occurring in class.

Such a progressive transfer of roles and power is a necessary step in building autonomous learners, as, when learners are given complete empowerment over the how, what and when to study, there is quite often the risk of motivation decreasing. Therefore, some of the most relevant roles that teachers use in the primary stages of empowering autonomous learners refer to: *organiser/ coordinator* (for categories of tasks and types of interactions to follow, for providing clear and relevant instructions), *assessor* (to provide accurate feedback, to indicate learning opportunities for improvement) and *motivator* (to facilitate understanding regarding the particular benefits that learners gain from autonomous learning interactions). Moreover, having a strong exploratory function, autonomous learning grants learners the freedom to better identify their learning styles and participate in interactions that are not limited by the instructor's teaching style or by time constraints.

Even more so, the online classroom, with its generous toolkit of learning apps and platforms, poses new challenges to how teachers can assist in the autonomy building transfer. Asking for directions/ support in virtual spaces is different from the onsite alternative, as there can be delayed responses or, on the contrary, teachers might find it more difficult to adapt their assistance roles,

⁴ W. Littlewood, „Autonomy: An anatomy and a framework,” in *System* 24 (1996), no. 4, p. 429.

⁵ P. Voller, “Does the Teacher Have a Role in Autonomous Learning?” in P. Benson and P. Voller (eds.) *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*, London, Longman, 1997, p.102.

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often feeling the urge to provide instructions that are too long and detailed, leaving little room for learners to actually complete the tasks on their own.

Secondly, the **choice of tasks and activities** in autonomous learning, initially under a teacher- guided framework and progressively handed over to the learner’s own willingness and needs, indicates that autonomy in learning fulfills multiple functions. From the educational role of using language in non-instructional contexts, to the psychological function of boosting motivation after completing self-study sequences, autonomy has the benefit of allowing language learners to customise their learning according to their particular needs. This way, autonomy in learning projects a pedagogical dimension, as learners gradually manage to diagnose their particular learning needs and thus reshape the learning objectives. Equally important, the sociological dimension will enable learners to use language through natural and spontaneous interactions, and to communicate with peers of different language level, requiring negotiation skills along with language skills.

If in onsite classes these dimensions are often scaffolded, the teacher designing each dimension with the clear function it fulfills (e.g., teacher identifies learner needs and organizes content so as to suit the majority, teacher may tend to use the educational and pedagogical dimension more than the sociological one), virtual learning spaces will rather blend in the educational and sociological features. Likewise, motivation plays a more stringent role in online autonomous learning, as each completed task or interaction will leave the learner with a sense of accomplishment or instantly generated feedback, which can be difficult to provide by a teacher for each student in onsite classes.

Thirdly, to make learner autonomy a genuine tool for improving learners’ language level online, the aspect of how **language learning pedagogy** is present **in virtual spaces** is essential. Teaching and learning online cannot be envisaged as a mere transfer of the materials and resources from onsite class into the virtual world, nor can the teacher assume the same traditional roles. Multimodal communication has a transformative function and embeds valuable affordances -a term coined by Gibson⁶ - which pave a smoother way for language learning. Referring to the affordances for language learning, Moeller⁷ mentions “opportunities for enhancing students’ access to up-to-date and even up-to-the-minute cultural materials and realia. The use of these on-line authentic materials can help provide students with a level of cultural awareness that is most often acquired by means of experience abroad.” (p. 8). Such affordances have the advantage of facilitating learning interactions online around topics and events (e.g., live exhibitions, live debates, workshops,

⁶ J. Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1979, p. 39.

⁷ A. Moeller, “Moving from instruction to learning with technology: Where’s the content?”, in *CALICO Journal*, 14 (1997), no. 2-4, p. 5-13. Available at <http://calico.org/journalarticles.html>, accessed 12. 07. 2021.

conferences, webinars) that would otherwise be little accessible to onsite learners on a regular basis.

With the wide array of available learning apps to use throughout the language learning process, be it during online classes or organised as assessment sequences, there are also some challenges worth mentioning in the context of applying the pedagogical framework to online autonomous learning. On one hand, since teaching and learning shifted to exclusive digital formats in a very short period of time (with the measures imposed by the pandemic), most educators chose to explore the affordances of these apps without there being any documented pedagogical and didactic support for the respective apps. In a manner of saying, several of the game-based learning apps and popular gamified platforms (Kahoot! Quizlet, Quizizz) have gained more and more popularity, but there is a stringent need to use them with some pedagogical background and not predominantly for entertaining and assessment purposes.

On the other hand, there is the aspect of frequent distractors and interruptions in the online space, which might decrease productivity with autonomous learners. It takes motivation and discipline to focus on the tasks and interactions, ingredients that can unfortunately be easily forgotten while engaging in the online realm.

ESP autonomous learning between gamified learning experiences, digital interactions and communities of practice

Gaining autonomy as a digital ESP learner is a validation of having succeeded in acquiring proper language structure, in defining one's own learning needs for the field of study and in finding motivation to engage on a regular basis in digital interactions. Such interactions, which are at first teacher guided and gradually handed over to the autonomous learner to manage, can span from gamified learning experiences to communication with peers/teachers/ native speakers on social media or learning platforms, and to joining language communities of practice. All these digital interactions provide resourceful learning experiences, generating contexts for language practice and learning and rewarding the autonomous learner with sufficient motivation to continue this endeavour.

Gamified learning experiences, i.e., synchronous/ asynchronous digital escape rooms or platform designed games, provide both the functionality of self-assessment and individual practice and boost learning motivation. Digital escape rooms (designed on platforms such as Microsoft OneNote, Google Slides, Deck Toys, Microsoft Sway) have the advantage of allowing interactions with peers, while at the same time creating a game experience that enables players to use language in customised learning scenarios. "Designed as online controlled environments for learning, educational breakout rooms can provide resourceful contexts for assessing language skills and for uncovering learner understanding. Whether the advantages of using them throughout the process of evaluation refer to granting more learner autonomy, to allowing for a

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complex form of assessment of language skills or to diversity in teaching methods, students are highly stimulated by such gamified alternatives.”⁸

For autonomous learning, digital escape rooms can be designed by teachers so as to include various language skills- communicative skills, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary skills, idioms etc. Learners will have to escape each digital sequence by working with their peers- thus practicing their speaking skills, and by decoding various challenges which are structured as language tasks. Learning autonomy is thus a key instrument along the gamified experience, as learners perform in a rather informal environment, they must negotiate and explain their choices along the game and, upon completing the challenge, their motivation level is highly increased.

Such digital escape rooms can embed various tasks that enable players to use learning apps in order to escape the digital rooms. Some particular good practice examples are: using an embedded Padlet to trigger written responses from players (such a task could require participants to write topic-based paragraphs that respond to what the other participants had written before i.e. argumentative essay on niche tourism, article promoting a popular destination to exemplify English for Tourism Digital Escape Room scenarios), allowing learners to interact and respond using voice only or audio-video apps (Vicario and Flipgrid are suitable resources that allow for qualitative and creative peer-interaction), creating self-assessment learning worksheets (interactive worksheets, Wordwall, EdPuzzle, Quizziz, Kahoot!). The result of learning via digital escape rooms is that learners gain autonomy in using language for particular purposes, they interact verbally or in written form and they gain “emotional ownership of their language learning.”⁹

The most relevant benefit of joining communities of practice to enhance autonomous language learning is that communities of practice facilitate communication among various learners and specialists in a specific field of practice, thus customizing ESP language learning in the digital framework. “Communities of practice are voluntary groups of people who, sharing a common concern or a passion, come together to explore these concerns and ideas and share and grow their practice.”¹⁰ The exchange of information and learning practices that occur within communities of practice stimulate learner

⁸ Ioana Mudure-Iacob, “Hide and Seek in Gamified Learning: Formative Assessment of ESP in Digital Escape Rooms,” in *Astra Salvensis*, IX (2021), no. 17, p. 217.

⁹ V. Kohonen, “Autonomy, authenticity and agency in language education: the European Language Portfolio as a Pedagogical Resource”. in R. Kantelinen & P. Polari (eds.) *Language Education and Lifelong Learning* Helsinki, University of Eastern Finland. Philosophical Faculty, 2009, p. 27.

¹⁰ B. Mercieca, “What is a community of practice?”, in J. McDonald and A. Cater -Steel (eds.), *Communities of Practice. Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education*, Singapore, Springer Nature, 2017, p 7.

autonomy particularly due to the fact that participants will engage in conversations revolving around the field of interest/study, thus being required to use specific purpose language.

Moreover, in virtual communities of practice or even in language cafes, which are becoming popular among universities, participants share their intercultural perspectives, emphasizing the sociological dimension of autonomous learning. Interactions in virtual communities of practice occur either on social media, on discussion boards, using email or other educational platforms and LMS. Autonomy in learning is supported in this context not only by the cross-cultural interactions among peers, but also by making learners pay more attention to netiquette, user-friendly language and politeness toolkits in the virtual learning rooms. Another benefit refers to the opportunity of interacting with academic staff, professionals in the field of study or native speakers, making language learning more authentic and generating multiple and resourceful learning experiences.

Conclusion

Facilitating language learners to become autonomous is tantamount to validating their progress with vocabulary and receptive and productive skills acquisition. An ideal balancing of guided ESP instruction, with structured content, customised methods and approaches, on one hand, and learners' readiness to expand knowledge input by autonomous practice, on the other hand, would make ESP teaching/learning a flawless endeavour. Unfortunately, such balances are seldom made possible, either because of lack of interest/time/ resources, or because teachers fail to recognise the importance that autonomy plays in learning.

As promising and entertaining as the plethora of digital tools, apps and platforms might seem for the ESP teacher, there are also limitations to keep in mind when designing and delivering online ESP classes. Namely, the fact that the pedagogical usefulness of highly used apps is not yet fully tested, nor can the impact it has had on digital native learners be properly quantified indicates that the infusion of ESP classes with apps without accurate correlation with the specific content might be questionable. In exchange, the online framework of teaching/ learning ESP does allow for exploratory scenarios, whose validation is seen in the motivation and engagement levels of students with autonomous learning.

Having experienced a year and a half of exclusively online ESP instruction, the good practice examples, with remarkable feedback from learners, were the use of activities and learning scenarios that allowed participants to be more autonomous. Among these, gamified learning tasks such as digital escape room challenges, gamified lesson sequences, virtual interactions organised in the form of peer assessment using audio-video digital tools and respectively communication in micro-communities of practice proved to be the most effective. Not only did they generate enthusiasm in learning, but

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they also allowed for genuine know-how exchanges, collaboration and competitiveness in language use, and respectively creating learning contexts that enabled students to use a variety of other skills (technological, visual, language skills). The greatest challenge remains whether these learners are willing to pursue further language learning beyond the horizon of the syllabus-allocated framework. However, there are strong indicators that after getting a sense of the affordances that ESP provides in the contexts of employability skills, learners will improve autonomous learning and turn it into lifelong language learning.