Educating Towards Learner Autonomy in Early Education

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Abstract Although learner autonomy is a widely recognized concept, whose value has been acknowledged by the Polish Ministry of National Education, it is not commonly implemented in Polish schools. Some signs of learner autonomy can be seen in secondary schools or at tertiary level, but the connection between autonomy and children has yet to be established. The aim of the article is to tackle the issue of autonomy among young learners and to attempt to prove that learner autonomy and young learners are not mutually exclusive. In the theoretical part, some relevant research and publications on child development and learner autonomy will be presented. Subsequently, the features of young-learner autonomy will be outlined. The empirical part will give an account of a *Teaching young learners project* that was carried out at Gdańsk University Teacher Training College. The implementation of the principles of autonomy in the course of the project and some observations made during it will be presented.

1 Introduction

Since the 1980s learner autonomy has been one of the buzz words in the field of foreign language teaching (Little, 1991, p. 2). It has been researched and described, a number of definitions have been proposed, its undeniable significance in language learning has been established, and there have been attempts to implement it in some educational contexts, with various results (Barfield & Delgado Alvarado, 2013; Benson, 2001, 2007; Benson & Voller, 1997; Dam, 1995, 2001; Hobbs & Dofs, 2013; Little 1991, 1999, 2007, 2012; Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2002; Morrison & Navarro, 2014; Pawlak, 2011; Raya, Lamb, & Vieira, 2007; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000). The importance of independent and autonomous learning has been recognized by the Polish Ministry of National Education. In the ministerial documents, the following aims of pre-school education are mentioned: supporting

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independent actions of a child; creating conditions allowing children to make choices and realize the positive effects of their actions; helping the child to identify problems, plan and tackle tasks; creating conditions allowing the child to recognize and use different ways of approaching learning tasks; and supporting creativity in different fields of activity.[1] Also the skills and abilities that a child should develop in primary education refer in many respects to learner autonomy: planning, organizing and assessing their own learning, taking more and more control over it; solving problems in a creative way; searching, ordering and using information from different sources; using knowledge in practice, providing valuable experience and establishing useful habits.[2]

Despite the educational legislation and the undeniable popularity of the concept of autonomy, there is little or no sign of its implementation in lower primary schools. This is hardly surprising as, if we consider the most common meaning of the term—some kind of independence in decision-making and action—most people would naturally associate autonomy with adult learners, possibly also those in their teens, but definitely not with children. The aim of this paper is to present some arguments in favor of young-learner autonomy and some reflections regarding the incorporation of the principles of autonomy into teaching English to young learners.

2 Young Learners and Autonomy

In Polish publications on learner autonomy the authors' stance on the relationship between learner autonomy and learner age is clear—almost all of them consider an autonomous learner to be an adult learner.[3] What is more, there are not too many articles devoted to learner autonomy in the context of early education (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2011). In a special issue of the journal *Języki Obce w Szkole [Foreign Languages in School]*, devoted to autonomy, there are only several texts connecting the notion of autonomy with young learners.[4]

Komorowska (2004, p. 115) has stated that it would be "more than difficult to introduce full autonomy" in the young learner classroom. In her view, children need "close guidance from the teacher", mainly because of safety reasons, and they should be constantly under supervision, which makes it almost impossible to

[1]Regulation of the Polish Minister of National Education 2000; Regulation of the Polish Minister of National Education and Sports 2002.

[2]Regulation of the Polish Minister of National Education 1999; Regulation of the Polish Minister of National Education 2001.

[3]M. Wysocka (2012) during her plenary lecture at the Autonomy Conference in Konin defined an adult learner as somebody who is over 13, which would mean students of middle school in Poland. Young learners are considered to be children up to the age of 10, that is, learners in pre-school and lower primary school.

[4]In fact, there are only five texts (out of 42) devoted to young learners by Andrzejewska, Sikora-Banasik, Nicholls, Pamuła and Krause.

introduce autonomy while teaching this age group. However, Komorowska agrees that limited autonomy could be implemented to some extent as far as methods, techniques and work organization are concerned. Also Stępniewska-Dworzak (2004, p. 243) argues that it is difficult to make young learners work independently, both in and outside the classroom as children need to be supported by an adult they trust—the teacher. Kamińska (2004) gives examples of some mnemonic techniques that can be used to develop young-learner autonomy, such as TPR, spatial grouping, acrostics, poems, rhymes and songs.

If there is so little attention given to autonomy in the context of teaching English to young learners, if so many researchers reject the idea of children being autonomous, can autonomy be associated with this age group? Can children be autonomous learners? Undeniably, there is evidence, at least in some publications, of another trend showing some awareness of the importance of implementing autonomous learning at an earlier age. Little et al. (2002, p. 1) believe that "autonomy is an essential characteristic of all truly successful learners, regardless of their age". In a different publication Little (1991, p. 46) states that learners should be "encouraged to start accepting responsibility for their own learning (…) as soon as possible", as the techniques that are commonly used in order to promote autonomy at higher levels of education can be and are successfully used in primary schools because they "imitate the modes of learning that have shaped the child's development to date: problem-solving in a context of social interaction". Habrat (2008) observes the importance of introducing learners to autonomous work as early as possible as fostering autonomy is a long-term process that involves changing attitudes and that cannot happen overnight. Cichoń (2002) argues that trying to introduce new attitudes to learners at an older age might fail as they might have developed learning habits that do not support autonomy, such as a preference for teacher-based instruction, or reliance on the teacher's control, supervision and evaluation. Also Biedroń (2004), reflecting on the psychological version of autonomy (Benson, 1997), advocates the importance of introducing learner autonomy among younger learners, as "it is difficult to change the processes and thinking stereotypes in people whose personality has already been formed" (Biedroń, 2004, p. 86). Little (1991, p. 46) suggests that secondary level learners encountering autonomous learning for the first time can be resistant to it, as they have gone through "the experience of institutionalized learning" and therefore become more teacher-dependent. He also concludes that "the older learners are when they first meet the idea of autonomy, the harder the teacher will have to work to persuade them that it makes sense" (1991, p. 48). The same line of reasoning is presented by Klus-Stańska and Nowicka (2005), who maintain that "the first years a child spends at school inevitably determine who the child will become, and consolidate thinking and reasoning habits" (p. 7). A learner at higher levels of education "is not A learner, but THE learner who has been formed by previous school experiences" (p. 8).

The above-mentioned publications show that it is essential to help children develop certain learning habits as early as possible, and create situations in which they can become accustomed to autonomous learning. At an early age, children try to find their own ways of tackling tasks, and develop their own strategies for planning, carrying out their plans and solving problems. Therefore, the sooner they

are introduced to an autonomous environment, the greater the chances that they will become autonomous learners.

3 Personality Development Theories and Autonomy

Implementing the principles of autonomous teaching in courses for young learners seems controversial to many teachers as they do not believe that young children are capable of developing autonomous thinking and behavior. However, there is some evidence proving the opposite. Little (2012) believes that even babies can be regarded as autonomous. He quotes Salmon, who states that "[babies] are hardly passive creatures to be easily molded by the actions of others. From their earliest years, boys and girls make their active presence, their willful agency, their demands and protests, very vividly felt. In every household that has children, negotiations must be made with young family members: their personal agendas have somehow to be accommodated".

Autonomy is a concept that often appears in psychological theories of personality formation. Erikson (2000) portrays the child's development in the form of identity crises. If the child can cope with the crisis, he is ready to go up to the next stage, and, finally, reach maturity. According to Erikson, the first signs of autonomy appear at the age of two, at the stage whose crisis is called *autonomy versus shame and doubt*. At that age, the child learns to be self-reliant in basic routines but also tries to be more psychologically independent of the parents. As a result, the child learns to control its behavior, its determination develops and the child tests possibilities in exercising his autonomy (Engler, 1985. pp. 195–196).

Similarly, in Allport's theory (1961), the first signs of the child's autonomy become visible between the age of two and three, when the child's *self-esteem* develops and when the child struggles to be independent and act alone. This autonomy can be observed in negation of adults' commands and in the child's independent exploration of its surroundings as the child becomes more and more cognitively curious and needs to interact with the surrounding world (Pytka, 2000, p. 32). Later the child's autonomy expands when the function of s*elf as a rational coper* develops, between six and twelve years of age. The child becomes more proficient in rational thinking and decision-making and copes better with independent problem-solving. At the age of thirteen, the child enters the phase of *intentional self,* becomes mature and autonomous, fully aware of its abilities and able to plan his or her own aims independently of others (Engler, 1985, pp. 239–240; Fontana, 1988, pp. 244–255). According to Allport, autonomy is one of the features of mature personality. It allows a person to develop self-esteem and self-assessment, to plan for and reach success, and develop strategies for coping with failure (Engler, 1985, pp. 240–242). It is achieved by completing all the seven stages of personality development.

Allport's and Erikson's theories refer to child autonomy in the context of the child's development and show the relation between the successful completion of

identity/psychosocial phases and the growth of personal autonomy. Their research shows that if a person does not experience and develop autonomy up to a certain age, at an older age he or she might not be able to develop the features of an autonomous human being at all. What is more, Brzezińska (2000, p. 231) observes that if children fail in their attempts to become more autonomous, they develop lower self-esteem and feel ashamed of themselves. Pytka (2000, p. 32) puts it even more forcefully, noting that "the development of healthy personality of a child depends on how the child goes through different stages of personality development. (…) If the child's needs are not fulfilled, later in life he becomes an unsteady, aggressive, malicious, egoistic and envious person, and his normal development is dubious".

Creating optimal conditions for the development of autonomy at different phases will aid the development of a healthy autonomous personality. And such features of personality as independent decision-making and readiness to take responsibility for decisions are developed in the child beginning with the age of two, and also later when the child attends lower primary school, between the ages of six and twelve. According to psychological research, not only can autonomy be promoted among young learners but it in fact should be promoted, as it is in line with the child's natural development. Neglecting or failing to incorporate autonomy while working with children can have negative effects as far as the child's development is concerned.

4 Young-Learner Autonomy: An Attempt to Define the Concept

There are a lot of definitions of autonomy, some of them stressing the person's independence, some responsibility, while others decision-making, freedom of choice or independent thinking. The most widely known definition of autonomy was given by Holec (1981, p. 3), who regards autonomy mainly from the point of view of the learner's responsibility as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". According to Holec, learner autonomy requires taking responsibility for "all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning" such as the aims, contents, methods, techniques and evaluation (1981, p. 3). Little (1991, p. 4) defines autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". The model of autonomy presented by Little (2007) consists of three components: learner involvement, learner reflection and authentic target language use in which the first two are immersed.

Muszyńska (1991, p. 113) defines autonomy as "the ability to realize different tasks, and the capability of taking charge of one's actions, which means formulating one's aims, finding ways of achieving them, and also taking decisions concerning oneself". She describes two aspects of independence. The first one is connected

with self-reliance in simple daily routines such as getting dressed or eating, whereas the other refers to taking charge of one's actions and independent decision making.

There is yet another meaning of autonomy that should be taken into consideration in this discussion. Klus-Stańska (2009a) calls it *cognitive autonomy*. It is rooted in constructivism and relates to Piaget's and Bruner's understanding of cognitive development of the child. Cognitive autonomy can be defined as "conceptual and decisive independence of the learner in his attempts to construct mental models of reality" (2009a, p. 61). Cognitively autonomous learners explore, examine, discover and think creatively and independently, developing a number of cognitive procedures (Okoń, 1997, pp. 10–11). Their activity is individualized, manifold and varied and therefore unpredictable before a given lesson (Klus-Stańska 2009b, p. 69). These learners are reflective, do not take the teacher's explanations or those offered in coursebooks for granted, try to find solutions themselves and learn to cope with problems on their own. In some of his publications, Little (2003) also adds a similar element of learner autonomy, which he calls *independent thinking*.

The issue which we might have to address here is which definition of autonomy can be used to describe young-learner autonomy? It is an issue of crucial importance as the teacher's understanding of the concept of autonomy influences directly his or her classroom practices. If he or she defines young learner autonomy only in terms of self-reliance in simple routines, this will be the only field in which children can exercise autonomy in the classroom—when getting dressed, packing their own bags or going to the toilet on their own. If the teacher believes that children are not autonomous in the sense that they can take initiative and responsibility for the process of their own learning and that they have not developed the capacity to act independently yet, he or she will not allow them to take part in planning and will structure all tasks for them in such a way that children are not involved in decision-making. On the other hand, if the teacher defines autonomous learners as pupils who are cognitively curious, she will involve them in a different kind of task.

5 Description of the Project

The discussion presented in this article is based on a *Teaching young learners educational project* that was carried out at Gdańsk University Teacher Training College between 2006 and 2010. The participants of the project were teacher trainees who volunteered to take part and a group of young learners they taught. The children were 5–7 years of age when the project started and 10–12 years of age when it ended. The project lasted four academic years, but while some of the children stayed with us for the whole of this time, there were also such who left earlier or joined us on the way.

The children had two classes of English a week, one 60-min class and one 90-min class. The trainees had two additional 90-min teacher training sessions a week. The main aim of the project was to incorporate the principles of autonomy in

teaching English into a young learner syllabus. As the main focus was learner autonomy, it was also the principle of the teacher-training course. In practice, this meant that the trainees had a great deal of freedom and could decide about many aspects of the course: When they taught, who they collaborated with, or what topics, materials and techniques they used. Some of this, however, had to be negotiated with the young learners, who also enjoyed much freedom. The language of instruction in both courses—for children and for teacher trainees—was English.

6 Principles of Young-Learner Autonomy

The principles of the course evolved as we progressed. The rules for fostering learner autonomy that we developed were based on Little's (2007) principles for autonomous language learning. However, they were adapted according to the needs of the age group.

6.1 Target Language as a Means of Communication

The most important principle introduced from the very beginning of the course was the use of the target language, as we strongly believe that "language learning depends crucially on language use" and the amount of language learnt by children is directly related to "the range of roles that are available to them in the classroom" (Little et al., 2002, p. 20). Also, we shared Little's belief about the correlation between the target language use and learner autonomy. As he put it "in language classrooms the development of autonomy requires that learners use the target language at once as medium of classroom communication, channel of learning, and tool for reflection" (Little, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, all the trainees and myself used only English when communicating with each other and with the children, not only during lessons, but also during breaks or when meeting children outside the university. Not surprisingly, there were some problems with this approach. Some children did not feel secure at first, refused to take part in activities, and demanded instructions in Polish. However, we decided to be consistent, spoke English and waited. Using body language, facial expressions, flash cards, book pictures and simple drawings, we managed to sustain communication with the learners. It did not take long before the learners got used to the English language and from one lesson to the next were able to understand more and more. They also started developing strategies for coping with situations when they did not understand something. They asked a lot of questions in Polish, we repeated them in English and answered them also in English. They directed questions to trainee teachers but also to the children who could understand more and who became interpreters for those who needed clarification and help.

In teacher-learner interaction we managed to maintain conversations in English, at least on our part. However, when children worked in groups, designing something, planning their work, solving a problem, or evaluating their work, it was more natural for them to speak Polish. We did not try to impose the use of English in such situations as we assumed that for some time it would be their only possible means of effective communication. On many occasions, we took part in half-Polish, half-English conversations, using caretaker talk: helping learners with their task, translating when necessary, providing necessary structures or vocabulary, or scaffolding their attempts at using English. We did not pretend we did not understand Polish but used caretaker talk, as it provides "a secure and supportive environment which gives the children confidence to try out language" (Slattery & Willis, 2001, p. 11). Caretaker talk helps learners in language acquisition as children can learn only the language they hear around them. Scaffolding conversations with them by paraphrasing in English what they have said in Polish, providing a correct version of their attempts in English and presenting them with words and phrases they lack gives them an opportunity to listen to English and, in effect, helps them develop target language fluency that is "some way beyond their unaided capacity" (Little et al., 2002, p. 20).

No matter how hard we tried to use English exclusively, there were situations, very few, though, in which we had to switch to Polish. This happened, for example, in emergency cases, when a child started crying or some children started fighting with each other. Then it was more natural for us to respond quickly in the mother tongue.

6.2 Learner Involvement: Freedom of Choice

Another principle of autonomous learning is learner empowerment. Learner involvement increases motivation and can be achieved by shifting the focus from the teacher to the learner and, consequently, from teaching to learning (Dam, 1995). One of the possible ways of achieving this is transferring the responsibility for the course elements from the teacher to learners, by giving students a greater degree of freedom in decision making. However, what does it mean in practice, especially when you work with young learners? To what extent can you let children decide about what they do? How much freedom can you give them? These are the very questions we had to keep asking ourselves from the beginning of the project.

We assumed that there are a number of issues we would not let the learners decide. The aim of the course was to learn English, so any decisions that were against this aim were not taken into consideration. Apart from that, we assumed that autonomy does not entail anarchy, so we rejected any attempts to disrupt the course of our lessons or disturb other learners. Any other suggestions about what to do, how to do it, where to do it or who to do it with were considered. We took special care to check that the learners' choices were not superficial but genuine. Superficial choices, such as, for example, choosing the color of the crayon to mark a line in a

task, do not make any difference to the learning process as it does not really matter if the child chooses red or orange. Genuine choices bring a real change in the learners' attitude to learning. The choice could refer to the topic or the technique used. Children could also decide about who they worked with as we assumed good collaboration between learners would bring better results. We also agreed if a child wanted to work alone. Another type of decisions made by learners considered the time taken to do certain tasks—in class or at home—providing it did not interfere with the lesson. The ways in which learner involvement was fostered in the project are presented in the subsections below.

6.2.1 The Process Syllabus

One of the fields in which students could negotiate and practice decision-making during the project was the course syllabus. We decided against following a conventional syllabus and, therefore, against using a coursebook, to escape 'the tyranny' of both. Instead, we developed a process syllabus. A syllabus gives information about what is to be achieved and provides "a clear framework of knowledge and capabilities selected to be appropriate to overall aims" (Breen, 2001, p. 151). Beyond any doubt, there are a lot of advantages of using a prescribed syllabus. However, a clearly defined syllabus might be limiting to learners' autonomy because it outlines the outcomes of the course very precisely and blocks the possibility of introducing new topics and language areas that arise in the course of work. Syllabuses that specify the course outcomes "fulfil a training function and result in restricted competence". On the other hand, process-oriented syllabuses "are educative in function and lead to general competence" (Nunan, 1988, p. 43). We negotiated parts of the syllabus with the learners, believing that negotiation is directly related to learner independence and leads to learners taking greater responsibility for the learning process. We also assumed that taking active part in planning helps students gain a better perspective on what they do and aids them in evaluating their learning afterwards.

Owing to the learners' involvement in syllabus design numerous topics were added to it, for example: children's favorite music bands and their music, real stories behind cartoon films, places they visited or would like to visit, their hobbies, stories, favorite animals, favorite films, astronomy and physics. It is true that such topics appear in language coursebooks but almost never in coursebooks for young learners. Coursebook content for young learners is often infantilized, following a commonly held belief that if the language skills of foreign language learners are basic, then their intellectual potential and cognitive development will be equally basic. As a result, seven and eight-year-old students are given tasks that are appropriate for two-year-olds, and coursebook language does not exceed the level of "I like pizza" and "The apple is red". Thanks to the process syllabus the participants of the course could learn incomparably more, acquired more sophisticated vocabulary and sustained high motivation throughout the course. Figure 1 includes an original text produced by a seven-year-old boy. There are some mistakes in the

text, but, undeniably, it communicates much more than coursebook based sentences on planes, such as “A plane can fly” and “The plane goes vroom”.

6.2.2 Arousing Students’ Cognitive Curiosity

Another means of making students more involved in language learning is challenging them cognitively. Cognitively challenging tasks focus not only on the target language but also develop learners’ reasoning, making them tackle concrete problems. They are, for example, problem-solving activities, tasks with multiple solutions, logical puzzles as well as riddles and mysteries. In such tasks, learners give their own opinions and ideas, solve mysteries and problems, look for information themselves and try to relate their work to their own experience. They may also design their own tasks and puzzles for other students.

An example of such a task is *interactive story-telling*, incorporating some elements of computer games strategies and story-telling. Learners are presented with a story, but, to find out what happens next, they have to look for clues, gain passwords and solve tasks. For example, after they found the letter presented in Fig. 2, they had to identify pictures referring to highlighted phrases. On the back of each picture there were a few words written and the children had to arrange them into a logical whole. The sentence they came up with was another piece of instruction. Another type of cognitively challenging tasks are those presenting new information to students about the world, geography, biology, history or astronomy.

6.2.3 Logbooks

The idea of logbooks was taken from Dam’s (1995) program. Logbooks are different from notebooks in which learners write exercises from the coursebook or copy sentences from the blackboard. They belong to the learners and only learners decide what should go in them and what can be skipped. Therefore, they involve the learner more and put the child in a central position. Learners might use logbooks to write vocabulary they learnt during lessons, to draw or stick pictures, or to write the homework assignment (given by the teacher or decided on by themselves). Logbooks are an excellent way of keeping a written record of what was done in class and in addition are a valuable source of information for the teacher and parents about students’ progress, interests and needs. They provide an opportunity for communication not only between students but also between students and the teacher (Dam, 1995, p. 40). In our class, in some cases there was a real communicative exchange going on between the teacher and the learner—the teacher commented on a text or picture, asking some question, and the child responded by writing or drawing something else, which was then commented on by the teacher.

My favorite ship is Quin Merry 2. My favorite plane is Airbus A 380. I like German LUFTHANSA, poland LOT, ENGLAND WIZZAIR, poland CENTRAL WINGS C-S, Grece HELIOS. My favorite is POLISH COST GUARD and U.S. AIR FORCE, F. 16 fajting falcon, HARIER F18, HELICOPTER BLACK hauk

Fig. 1 An example of a text produced by a seven-year-old boy

Hello,
This is ***a letter*** for you:
there is ***an orange cat*** who doesn't have a hat
he isn't alone and he's got ***a green phone***
he's got ***a friend who can fly***
I don't know why…
the friend is ***red with a white head***
they have ***a key that is small*** to open ***the door.***

Fig. 2 A letter used in an interactive story-telling task, designed by A. Christa, a trainee teacher taking part in the project

Fig. 3 An example of a task developed by learners

Find the word.
W L C C U O F E E T K h g g a i n p s a
_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
2:1, 15:3, 14:2, 5*2, 14-2, 3*5, 18-1, 21-2, 10*2

The most valuable use of logbooks was the *extra homework*—homework decided on by the learners as it gave them an opportunity to express themselves in English and showed their genuine interests. Text production is an important element in the process of the internalization of an additional language. Little et al. (2002) appreciate the role writing plays in language learning as it creates a number of practice opportunities for learners who can write and rewrite, "inspect and

re-inspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind", which makes them concentrate on language and content at the same time (Little et al., 2002, pp. 21–22). Most typical pieces of work the learners developed were texts about themselves, their families and friends, mini dictionaries, stories and cartoon strips but also tasks for other children (e.g., puzzles, crosswords, secret code messages and many others). Figure 3 presents an example of a puzzle for children that was designed by a seven-year-old boy, the same boy who presented the text about planes described earlier in this article. The trainees spent a long time trying to solve the puzzle, but the children did it in no time.

The extra homework tasks were highly motivating for the learners as they created a real communicative need—they searched for language to express their own thoughts in writing. Early attempts were very simple and very often contained lists of words, picture dictionaries or texts learners copied form food packages or advertisements. Learners also followed each other's ideas and produced similar text types. For example, if one child described her favorite doll, five more would do the same the next time. Later the learners got more and more creative in language use, they looked up the words they needed in dictionaries or coined some words, and they also used a greater variety of structures.

6.2.4 Collaborative Language Learning

There are at least two arguments that can be used in favor of collaborative language learning in a young learner class. The first one refers to the social-interactive nature of learning and the social development theory by Vygotsky, expanded by Bruner. Vygotsky (1978) coined the concept of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The definition implies that learning takes place through interaction with more knowledgeable others on the basis of what the learner already knows. Bruner, following the work of Vygotsky, introduced the concept of *scaffolding*, which explains how other people (i.e., more knowledgeable adults, parents, teachers, or peers) can help a child understand and solve problems by mediating the world for him or her (Cameron, 2001, p. 8). There are some more arguments supporting the social-interactive nature of learning in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Lave's situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1990).

Another argument supporting the idea of collaborative learning is connected with the content of a language class—the language. The main aim of using any language is communication, an exchange of ideas and an attempt to understand others. As Cameron (2001, p. 38) put it, "underlying any social interaction, including scaffolding, is the human desire to make contact with other people, to cross the gap between their thoughts and our own". By communicating with others,

we try to understand them, and the means of doing so is the language which, in a language class, becomes both the means and the objective of learning.

Being convinced of the beneficial effect of collaborative learning and believing that language is learnt best through social interaction with other language learners, we made collaboration one of the principles of the course and involved learners in pair and group work activities for most of the class time. They worked in teams on group projects, designed posters, wrote stories, letters, picture descriptions and play scripts, rehearsed mini dialogues and plays, and took part in many team games and competitions. They would very often switch into Polish when they discussed, negotiated or planned their work. This grew out of the natural need to communicate. However, after some time, thanks to scaffolding offered by the trainee teachers, the learners were more and more eager to attempt communicating in English, and in the final year they reminded each other "In English, please!".

6.2.5 The Autonomy Prime Time

As the objective of the course was to foster learner autonomy, we assumed that decision-making was the crucial element. Therefore, we introduced *the autonomy prime time*, half an hour, once a week. This was the students' time, intended for spontaneous play—they could do whatever they wanted to, providing they did it in English. There was a list of activities they could choose from. We gathered a library of real books for young learners (not abridged)—the learners could read them themselves or ask the trainees to read to them. We also had a collection of games that students could play in pairs or groups. There were original board games, bingo, jigsaw puzzles, but also games prepared by the trainees or the learners, such as dominoes, memo games, crosswords, cartoon strips and others. Some children decided to finish the task they had started during the lesson, but most of them either listened to book reading or played games. However, book reading was always their favorite activity. It is not surprising that this was the favorite part of the lesson for most of the young learners. They associated lessons with learning and the *autonomy time* with playing and felt this time belonged only to them. They did not have to negotiate what they wanted to do with anybody; they could make individual decisions and that made them true 'owners' of the time.

6.3 Learner Reflection

Language learners can be engaged in two kinds of reflection: *metalinguistic* and *metacognitive* (Ridley, 2003, p. 78). Both types should be interrelated: Students analyzing the language start reflecting on what they know, what they have learnt and what they can do to progress. As Little (2003, p. 17) points out, learner reflection is related to the learner empowerment principle as "it is impossible consciously to accept responsibility for anything, and then act on that responsibility,

without thinking about what you are doing". Learners who start planning their work, choosing topics and materials, and designing their own work, should start reflecting on their work and progress, hopefully taking their reflections into account in their future planning. Also, learner reflection should be connected with the principle of target language use—doing it in English gives learners yet another opportunity to practice the language. Learner reflection proved to be the most problematical principle to implement. This was because, firstly, the learners' language level was very basic and it was extremely difficult to do it in English, and, secondly, the students' were reluctant to think back, reflect and analyze.

Reflection on language was incorporated into the input stages of lessons by bringing in elements of guided discovery techniques and inductive teaching. Young learners proved to be very observant as far as language forms were concerned, although, of course, some of them were more perceptive than others and some never noticed anything. The more observant learners spotted regularities of grammar, were able to explain rules, and noticed similarities and differences between forms and vocabulary items. Unsurprisingly, we observed those were the students who progressed faster than others.

Metacognitive reflection sessions were not done on a regular basis. We started with a questionnaire asking individual students what they did in class, what they learnt during the last lesson or a few lessons, whether they liked it or not, and about the possible usefulness of the language learnt, noting down the answers for them. It was time-consuming and did not bring the expected results. Learners were not willing to answer these questions, saying they "don't know" or "don't remember", or commenting that it was boring and "a waste of time". They were motivated to work more—play more games or listen to more stories and therefore they considered reflection a nuisance that took precious lesson time. Later on we tried to do the reflection in English and we decided to use *I can/I can't* statements. These also did not prove of much use as learners responded without much thought, with most of them choosing *I can* all the time. The most beneficial for the learners were the 'imposed reflection' questions we asked them when they faced some problems. For example, we asked them to think about tasks they did in the past, how they did them, what went wrong then and how they managed to complete the tasks anyway.

Looking back, I think we should have tried harder to explain the value of regular reflection to our learners. However, we faced a situation where these reflection sessions lowered our students' motivation to study English. They kept asking us not to do "those boring questions" that were "always the same". As a result, we decided to skip the reflection sessions to keep the learners happy and motivated. Although we felt that we failed on the planned reflection component of the course, we were able to see spontaneous reflection while the learners were working on different tasks. They were very good at giving reasons why they wanted to do a particular task, saying they were good at it, they enjoyed doing it, or explaining that they liked the written homework because then they could remember the spelling of words better. They were also very good at explaining why they chose to work with particular students, focusing not on personal preferences but also on skills, the strong and weak points of other students, and task objectives. It all proves that

young learners are capable of reflection, and they are observant and analytical; however, the reflection session should have been arranged in a different way, appropriately for their age, and when the children felt a need to reflect facing a new problem.

7 Conclusions

Young learners possess a lot of features that are typical of autonomous learners. They are cognitively curious as well as eager to learn new things and explore the world around them. They are intrinsically motivated, especially if they are cognitively engaged. They are capable of learning how to take responsibility for their own learning, and how to plan, implement the plan and evaluate their progress (cf. Wawrzyniak-Śliwska, 2005). Introducing the principles of learner autonomy in young learner education is undeniably possible, thanks to young learners' natural inclinations to be independent, their cognitive inquisitiveness to explore the world and their natural ability to question everything around them. It brings notable benefits in terms of their language proficiency and positive attitude towards learning in general and learning a foreign language in particular. It gives young learners the feeling of accomplishment and success, fosters their intrinsic motivation, provides cognitive challenge, makes them inquisitive in search of information, enhances their mental abilities and develops their feelings of agency and responsibility.

However, the principles of autonomy are rarely implemented in lower primary education. Although the main aim of this article was not to seek the reasons for this state of affairs, some of them should perhaps be considered. First of all, the decision to foster learner autonomy requires a shift in the teacher's beliefs about the nature of learning, and teacher and learner roles in institutionalized education. Traditional foreign language education, based on a published coursebook hinders the use of methodology focusing on the learner, learner-centered teaching and the implementation of the principles of autonomy. A syllabus based on a coursebook does not take account of learners' interests, narrows down the amount of negotiation concerning issues connected with the content of learning, and requires all students to work at the same time and pace, thus limiting their freedom and autonomy. Another obstacle impeding fostering learner autonomy are the teacher's beliefs and convictions about what autonomy is, what it depends on, what the benefits or the disadvantages of it are, who deserves to be autonomous, and who is its 'owner'—the teacher or the young learner. Yet another serious problem hindering the implementation of the principles of autonomy is teachers' reluctance to use the target language with young learners. Most lower primary teaching of English is done in Polish. Learners who only acquire some lexical sets of limited variation, a few grammar structures and no communicative skills cannot take charge of their learning of a foreign language. Teaching English to young learners in Poland does not take into account the principles of autonomy, not because children are not autonomous human beings or because they are not mature enough or clever enough

to become autonomous, but because institutionalized education, coursebooks and teachers with their strong views against learner autonomy do not allow children to exercise their independence.

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