

Stakanova, 2017

Volume 3 Issue 3, pp. 675-683

Date of Publication: 19th December, 2017

DOI- <https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.33.675683>

This paper can be cited as: Stakanova, E. (2017). Sense-Creative Context as a Factor of Learner Autonomy in a Foreign Language Acquisition. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3), 675-683.

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SENSE-CREATIVE CONTEXT AS A FACTOR OF LEARNER AUTONOMY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

The current study reveals the concept of sense-creative context as a factor of autonomy in learning a foreign language. Sense-creative context is a system of sense technologies that motivates students who are eager to know how to improve their knowledge. Using sense-creative technologies in teaching EFL is becoming a burning issue in the modern classroom due to the challenges University graduates face in real life. Sense-creative context in our study has been analyzed and implemented in EFL teaching with a focus on personal and meaningful development of the students. Three groups of students were formed (control group and two experimental groups). All were native speakers of Russian who studied English at Psychology Department of Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia. The control group mastered English fluently; some of them had passed Cambridge Examinations FCE, CAE. The second experimental group was taught English using regular and typical classroom activities. We administered sense-creative technologies, such as PLE, debates, projects to the third experimental group to form deep personal meaning and intrinsic motivation. The objective of the research was to find out that with the help of sense-creative strategies in learning a foreign language it is possible to observe the students' vocational aspirations, self-assessment and learner autonomy. The results have pedagogical implications for EFL curriculum and all who are involved in the language study. To recap, using the sense-creative context, we change the priorities

and form sense-creative approach, the essence of which is to put students in the conditions when he/she feels the intrinsic need to acquire knowledge.

Keywords

English as a Foreign Language, Motivation, Self-Regulation, Sense-Creative Technologies, Learner Autonomy

1. Introduction

Teaching the English language is a great challenge in many respects. Nowadays nobody doubts the status of the English language as an international language. Teaching our students to communicate in English we provide them with an opportunity to enter the wide community of English-speakers and to integrate into the world culture. Learning a foreign language we increase our knowledge about the world surrounding us because sometimes different languages may reflect various sides or aspects of the same phenomenon. Learning a foreign language we get to know more about the other people and start to understand what they are.

What is the most efficient way of learning the English language? How to choose a method of teaching that would help develop creative abilities and learner autonomy in the English language acquisition? This issue has always been a thorny problem and one that has culminated in numerous heated discussions. New emphasis on sense-creative technologies is enshrined and supported the process of transition from traditional methods of teaching to innovative ones. The purpose of the ESL course is to help learners master required skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and strategies thus sustaining learners' motivation, independence and creative thinking in plentiful follow-up activities.

2. Developing Learner Autonomy

Learners need to feel intellectually challenged and to experience the feeling of achievement and success in order to be stimulated and sustain their learning (Villiers, et. al 2008). By and large, this process can be enhanced by encouraging learners to be more autonomous and independent (which can boost confidence), by promoting self-esteem (which adds further motivation), and by providing more opportunities for self-assessment (which increases awareness of learning strategies and competence in learning).

2.1 What is meant by Learner Autonomy?

Suffice it to say, language learning, and therefore teaching, is no longer limited to increasing language skills, knowledge and usage for communicative purposes. It also includes teaching students ways of learning so that they become more efficient as learners. They can develop sense-creative technologies which take off in a big way and continue to support their long-term efforts after leaving school. This includes paying attention to learner confidence and learner competence. It means we need to consider how learners study and not what they study. The process is as important as the product.

To all intents and purposes, a teacher has an important role in encouraging a positive learning atmosphere in which students are actively engaged and prepared to think individually. A problem is that students are not used to learning individually. Without proper supervision and support, many do not have the skills and experience to be successful in learning on their own (Anikina, 2011). Outstanding learning requires that students should be personally engaged in the work they are doing. Learners should not be driven by the teacher directing the activity. Ideally, students should be self-motivated, resilient, and driven to make progress in their own learning (Beere, 2016). The main issue is to find the ways to extend students' education out of the classroom – to encourage them to take control over their learning. Teachers can encourage this by:

- Using active and inductive ways to encourage learners to think, guess, and predict meanings from a familiar context created (Villiers & Ward, 2008). This is in preference to telling learners new meanings, rules, without giving them a chance to use available clues.
- Encouraging learners to integrate their previous knowledge and to use their existing understanding to experiment and to work out their understanding of new concepts.
- Giving opportunities for learners to work autonomously so they experience the chance to organize themselves independently of the teacher, reinforce their confidence in themselves.
- Reflecting on and assessing their own abilities. Such self-awareness gives them knowledge about how to learn successfully, which techniques work for them, and therefore gives greater confidence about their own competences. Self-assessment is a flexible learning tool which helps to monitor their own progress so they can identify their success; set personal goals to increase self-directed learning and sense of achievement.

3. Different Approaches to Learner Autonomy

Self-directed learning spurs diversity. The term «learner autonomy» is unique in its versatility. This question gives a strong impulse for thorough investigation in this field. So, A.E. Kapaeva (2001) uses the term "self-study" foreign language, which defines the independent learning activity. This activity raises motivation. The author bolsters her argument with evidence that it is important for students to understand the meaning of learning English, and make English a bedrock value. Be that as it may, in order to carry out self-study a foreign language, one should self-regulate one's own cognitive activity and indicate self-control. A.E. Kapaeva (2001) demarcates three degrees of readiness for independent learning activities in the language acquisition:

- Being ready for copying activities (extrinsic motivation, low level of self-regulation, meaningful imitating a teacher's actions);
- Being ready to reproduce (extrinsic motivation; the average level of self-regulation, independent reproduction of the material);
- Being ready for the autonomous work (intrinsic motivation, high level of self-regulation, independent fulfilling the exercises).

4. The Essence of Sense-Creative Context

Sense-creative context is a system of teaching methods aimed at meeting individual needs of students in learning EFL (Stakanova, 2007). Personal-semantic paradigm is the conceptual approach to education fostering effort and resilience to failure in students. The individualization of education on the basis of student-centered differentiation provides the development of EFL learners, allows forming the skills of self-education and self-actualization of the person (Abakumova, 2008). It should be noted that a foreign language has to become a personal value. Sense-creative context initiates a specific semantic potential of students, allowing them to set goals, to learn the language, to improve one's knowledge, to exercise self-esteem and self-control. Thus, we are using sense-creative technologies to develop the semantic sphere of students.

Language teachers frequently use the term "motivation" when they describe successful or unsuccessful learners. During the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language, the learners' enthusiasm, commitment and persistence are the key elements of success or failure. Without sufficient motivation even the brightest learners are unlikely to persist long enough to attain useful language (Dornyei, 2001).

Motivation for the learning English can be increased by active methods of teaching, such as project work, thought-provoking assignments, debates. The old-school model of passively learning facts and reciting them out of context is no longer sufficient. Learners need more than basic subject-area knowledge. Information, which is easily accessible nowadays, should be applied to the real world. Project-based learning allows students to combine traditional classroom knowledge with the 21st century skills and cross-curricular skills boosting students' intrinsic motivation (Williams, 1999). Students become actively engaged in learning and get pleasure of learning new things themselves.

4.1 Debate Format

One of the interesting and thought-provoking forms of group work is debates. Debates date back to ancient Greece where they were the crucial element of Greek democracy. Debates help create critical thinking, rumination, and effectively manage the process of discussion, work out meaningful standpoint. As a group work, debates teach students to interact in team work, share ideas, and support team members. The salient features of a debate are time limit, debate format, variety of evaluation criteria, “for” and “against” arguments, respect for the opponent (Garkusha, 2010).

Here is a statement for a debate: *Mobile technology is more helpful than harmful*. The debate involves 2 groups, for and against. Brainstorm your arguments, and anticipate the arguments of the other side. Choose three people to represent the group. Conduct the debate, following the sequence.

1. Group A, present your arguments for the statement.
Group B, present your arguments against the statement.
2. Group A, support your arguments and criticize Group B's arguments.
Group B, back up your arguments and criticize Group A's arguments.
3. Group A, sum up.
Group B, recap.
4. Take a class vote.

5. Data and Methods

5.1 Participants

The study involved 150 psychology students studying English. The subjects were split into 3 groups: group 1 – control group, group 2 - experimental, group 3 – students of advanced level of English.

5.2 Methods

To investigate the motivation to learn the foreign language the questionnaire of "Sense-creative strategies in learning a foreign language" (Stakanova, 2007), questionnaire by Douglas Brown "Strategies of Learning English" (Brown, 2007), and the questionnaire by Michael Harris (Harris, 1994) were used.

At the beginning of the course, questionnaires and surveys are useful for discussing students' learning experiences. The mastery of EFL can be achieved in a number of different ways, using various strategies. Therefore, a key factor in achieving success is for learners to discover for themselves the methods and techniques by which they learn best. (Dornyei Z, 2001).

The participants were asked to estimate their motivational strategies of learning EFL. So, the following questionnaires were used in our study to assess students' learning strategies.

Strategies of Learning English (Brown, 2007)

Rate these statements A, B, C, D according to how far you agree with each of them. Note your reasons and any evidence to support your decisions.

A – Agree Strongly; B – Agree; C – Don't really agree; D – Disagree

1. You can learn to speak a foreign language quite well without lessons.
2. Many secondary students who have studied a foreign language leave school unable to communicate in it.
3. Learners often go on making the same error even after being corrected many times.
3. If students learn the rules of grammar they are quickly able to use them.
4. You must use the language freely to learn to speak it, even if you make a lot of errors.
5. Teachers should always correct student errors.
6. Reading widely is one of the best ways to learn another language.
7. People of all intellectual abilities can successfully learn another language.
8. The younger you are the better you will learn another language.
9. Extroverts make better language learners.

Further, the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire "Sense-creative Strategies in Learning a Foreign Language" (Stakanova, 2006). The questionnaire included 3 units consisting of various statements. The subjects need to specify what actions they do often (2 points), seldom (1 point), never (0 points).

- **Metacognitive Strategy** (developing ability to manage time, self-study, and learner autonomy)
- **Cognitive Strategy** (developing the skills of using the effective learning methods)

- **Socio-Affective Strategy** (developing social skills, a student-teacher interaction)

6. Results and Discussion

The noteworthy study is of relevance and revealed the following results.

By monitoring the three groups of subjects, we are able to point out that with the help of all above-mentioned sense-creative methods, such as debates, project work, problem-solving tasks, questionnaires it is possible to observe the students' vocational aspirations, self-assessment and learner autonomy. The given method defines the dominant cognitive strategies and the meaning of life of students.

According to the criterion of *meta-cognitive strategies*, the control group of respondents showed almost equal results with the experimental group. This confirms the fact that all students are trying in some way to effectively learn English and the ability to organize their training. However, students in the control group are more difficult to organize motivational activities. Their efforts are mainly focused on homework without any creative activities. Cognitive strategies of students in the control group are associated with psychological concepts such as the development of memory, thinking. They are more difficult to assess the personal experience with the English language, since this experience is necessary to explicate, i.e. transform into the verbal form. Participants in the control group pay more attention to grammar, i.e. the use of textual strategy. The difficulties encountered by students in the control group in socio-affective strategy are linked to the fear of making a mistake and misunderstanding. The subjects manifested self-control to prevent errors.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Research Limitation

Before discussing the findings, some limitations of the present study have to be acknowledged. The majority of the participants were selected due to their interest to learning English as a foreign language. There were part-time students studying autonomously who confronted the possible erroneous beliefs, expectations and assumptions that learners may have. Full-time respondents had general awareness about different ways languages were learnt and the number of factors contributing to success. Thus, generalizations of these findings should be cautious. Furthermore, the data were collected via online questionnaires which might have had some effect on the quality of the responses, although comparative analysis show that data gathered via traditional methods are as good as via Internet.

7.2 The Scope of Future Research

Future studies should explore long-term effect of different strategies of learning English especially for self-directed learning, for example, to see if problem-solving, projects and other sense-creative methods increase the intrinsic motivation. To investigate this, longitudinal studies would be especially useful. The problem merits further investigation and warrants closer scrutiny.

In conclusion, this study is of relevance since it sheds light on a number of issues in the current theories and approaches. The implementation of these objectives enables teachers to shift from the traditional language approaches to sense-creative context. The general conclusion is that using the sense-creation context, we change the priorities and form semantic approach, the essence of which is to put the student in the conditions when he/she feels the inner need to acquire knowledge. Autonomous learning is a viable road to success. Sense-creative technologies activate and stimulate the process of fulfilling comprehension exercises, develop self-regulation. Sense-creation technologies in teaching English broaden semantic scope of the student, allowing EFL learners to take the value of intercultural communication, take the English language as a source of self-development. Today nobody is to be convinced that language acquisition provides not only more durable and practical knowledge, but also carries a great intellectual, educational potential. According to long-term observations learning a foreign language:

- Stimulates the language and overall development of students;
- Attaches students to other cultures, thereby forming a universal consciousness;
- Creates a favorable basis for mastering a foreign language , as well as for further lifelong independent language learning at later stages;
- Improves general educational skills and learner autonomy by expanding their scope in the process of mastering a foreign language.

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