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Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**Ways of promoting becoming an independent language learner: beliefs of higher  
education LSP teachers on language learner autonomy**

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## **Theoretical overview: the topic and the objectives of the research**

One of the buzzwords of today's educational and professional discourse is life-long learning, along with efficiency and innovation. The research aims at examining the pedagogical ways of making language education<sup>1</sup> more efficient in higher education while at the same time taking into account reflect to the expectations set towards 21st century education. The research focuses on the following research topics: practical implementation of theoretical models; interpretations of language learner autonomy and teachers' beliefs about this notion.

The profound changes that have occurred in higher education recently have had an effect on the role of the teacher. Among the criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching (transferring relevant and up-to-date knowledge and skills) new aspects have emerged: the need for increasing students' involvement and active participation; taking advantages of new learning environments and applications; facilitating students in becoming independent and autonomous learners. These considerations have resulted in a new, changed, more complex interpretation of the teachers' role and explain why it is necessary to investigate teachers' notions about their professions. The narrower context of the investigation is teaching languages for special purposes (LSP) in higher education in Hungary, where the empirical research was carried out. LSP language teachers' beliefs about language learner autonomy and the relationship of their beliefs and their teaching practices were the special focus of the examination. The objective of the research is to reveal these beliefs and the role they play in making students independent (language) learners. Furthermore, the research attempts to create a comprehensive overview of factors hindering or promoting language learners' autonomy in and outside the classroom and to present some possible ways of fostering autonomy.

The first chapters of the dissertation deal with the interpretation of the notion of autonomy from different perspectives. As the context of the research is teaching languages for special purposes in higher education, the methodology of LSP and its status in language education, the special competences language teachers need and the ways LSP courses are planned and implemented are also presented. The special status of LSP teaching can be summed up as

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<sup>1</sup> Education here means teaching and learning

follows: high context dependency, innovative and integrative approach; flexibility and adaptivity (Kurtán, 2003; Belcher, 2009; Paltridge and Starfield, 2013).

The scientific beliefs and models of the notion of learning serve as a theoretical basis for the empirical research, as the interpretation of the idea of learning exerts an enormous influence on its implementation, that is, on the teaching practice itself. The dissertation introduces the most important models about learning with a special focus on their views on autonomy. The models and concepts are also investigated from the perspectives of teachers: what their roles are in each model. The learning objectives are becoming more and more complex and sophisticated and at the same time more individualised. As a result, teachers' roles and didactics – pedagogical views – are also undergoing changes to a certain extent. If teaching is interpreted as a constantly changing process, then an ever-changing learner and teacher attitude must be assumed. The creation of a new pedagogical culture is essential (Einhorn, 2015). According to the views of many, autonomy may play a very important role in the creation of this new paradigm (Finch, 2002; Benson, 2007; Little, 2007).

Based on the thorough analysis of the professional literature the following theoretical framework is identified for the research:

- learner autonomy (a kind of taking responsibility) should be distinguished from learning in an autonomous way (a way of learning);
- the interpretation of the notion of autonomy is determined by the research context;
- learner autonomy can be interpreted as a very complex notion including several skills used throughout the learning process;
- autonomy has both a wide and a narrow interpretation (as explained in the dissertation).

Teachers' beliefs play a key role in fostering autonomy (Benson, 2009). Their tasks include creating an autonomy-supportive atmosphere in the classroom, revealing the students' prior knowledge and language learning experience and familiarising students with the ways of becoming more autonomous learners. Students must be carefully prepared for taking responsibility for their decisions concerning learning. Alternatives should be offered, and the ways and consequences of making responsible decisions should be taught. It is essential to formulate explicitly the roles of the teacher and also that of the student, to make it clear to what extent the control, monitoring and evaluation are shared between the parties (Barfield et al., 2001). As these ideas and considerations constitute integral parts of the

constructivist approach, constructivism is introduced in the dissertation in special detail, highlighting the links between language teaching and constructivist views.

In the empirical research higher education language teachers' beliefs on autonomy are revealed in order to learn if the theoretical statements of the contemporary literature are known and accepted among teachers and to find what hinders implementation and developing autonomy in the classroom. The findings will contribute to the deeper understanding of the professional work and practices of LSP teachers and might have lessons for teacher training and professional training as well.

## **The research**

The following research questions are asked:

1. How do higher education (HE) language teachers in Hungary interpret the notion of language learner autonomy?
2. How do higher education language teachers see and judge their roles in forming and developing language learner autonomy?
3. What is the relationship between the professional self-image of HE language teachers and their beliefs on language learner autonomy?
4. Do the HE language teachers think that there is a difference between teaching general language and language for specific purposes from the point of view of language learner autonomy?
5. What do HE language teachers consider as important in order to develop language learner autonomy?
6. Are the activities considered as important to develop language learner autonomy implemented in the language classroom?

In order to answer the research questions both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used (Cohen et al., 2007; Dörnyei, 2007). The methodology of the research aims to meet the requirements of methodological triangulation (Szabolcs, 2001; Sántha, 2009), which enables the researcher to investigate the issue from different perspectives and make valid and justifiable research statements. Data collection was carried out by expert interviews and an on-line questionnaire survey.

The research is of a deductive nature as it examines a theoretical notion – language learner autonomy – and its interpretations. It tries to check the relevance and validity of the

statements of constructivist education in higher education language teaching and relate the findings to everyday teaching practices. The research can be regarded as deductive in terms of its basic theoretical consideration: teachers' beliefs substantially affect and influence their teaching styles and practices and also what happens in the classroom.

In the interviews theoretical sampling (among chosen experts) was used. Language teachers of different foreign languages from different higher education institutions took part in semi-structured interviews. The respondents have different lengths of experience and teach different types of languages for special purposes. The recorded interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analysed using MAXQDA 12.0 software.

The target population for the questionnaire survey was higher education language teachers (except those teaching foreign-language-major students). A piloted on-line questionnaire was sent to the language teachers (N=600). Out of the responses sent back a database for research was compiled (n=370) and analysed with the help of SPSS 22.0 statistical software (Falus and Ollé, 2008). Prior to the research the following hypotheses were set:

*Hypothesis 1: Hungarian higher education LSP<sup>2</sup> language teachers (hereinafter language teachers) do not have a common, widely accepted, consensus-based definition of language learner autonomy.*

*Hypothesis 2: Language teachers consider the original development of language learner autonomy as the task of the learner.*

*Hypothesis 3: Language teachers consider the enhancement of language learner autonomy as the teachers' task.*

*Hypothesis 4a: According to the language teachers, language learners require teachers' guidance in the language learning process.*

*Hypothesis 4b: According to the language teachers, language learners consider their teachers as responsible for learner success in language learning.*

*Hypothesis 5: There is a relationship between the professional self-image of language teachers and their views on learner autonomy.*

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<sup>2</sup> Languages for Special Purposes

*Hypothesis 6: There is a relationship between the experience of teachers (years spent in the profession) and their views on learner autonomy.*

*Hypothesis 7a: According to language teachers, learning languages for special purposes requires learner autonomy to a greater extent than learning foreign languages for general purposes.*

*Hypothesis 7b: According to language teachers, integrating disciplinary professional knowledge into the language learning process contributes to the development of language learner autonomy.*

*Hypothesis 8: Language teachers consider it to be important to involve students in the planning of language learning process. Ingredients of planning: course organisation, setting goals, choosing the material and the topics, classroom activities, teaching methods, learning methods, learning environment, evaluating prior knowledge and assessment.*

*Hypothesis 9: According to language teachers, language learner autonomy is implemented outside the classroom in the forms of learner activities.*

*Hypothesis 10: There is a difference between the implementation of activities in classes and the importance teachers attribute to those activities.*

## **Research findings**

The choice of topic for the research is a novelty, as there has not been any empirical research aiming to reveal the beliefs of higher education language teachers in Hungary. The main result of the research is that LSP language teachers' views on learner autonomy and its classroom implementation are revealed.

Hypotheses 1-4, 7, 8 and 10 were justified by the research findings. Hypotheses 5 and 9 could not be proved, whereas hypothesis 6 was partly justified. The main findings of the research are: a widely-accepted, general definition for learner autonomy does not exist among higher education language teachers. The language teachers consider it as their task to enhance learner autonomy; however, the original development of autonomy is considered by them to be the task of the learner. Most of the teachers say that fostering learner autonomy is a demanding venture within the frames of today's Hungarian higher education system. Possibilities for any personalised development are only partly provided, if at all. Based on the research possible reasons might be:

- the characteristics of the higher education system and the place of language education within the system;
- the characteristics of higher education pedagogy;
- personal attitudes and competences of language teachers teaching languages for special purposes (LSP);
- characteristics and shortcomings of language teacher education and of professional training for LSP teachers;
- the contradiction between the objectives of LSP learning (accommodation into professional society) and the criteria-oriented (language certificate-centred) output expectations;
- various and varied needs of language learners for autonomy.

The research findings justified the hypothesis, which assumes that language teachers perceive their students as requiring and expecting teachers' guidance in their learning. Teachers feel that they are assigned the responsibility for the success by their students. However, there is no significant correlation between the professional self-image of language teachers and their beliefs on language learner autonomy. The hypothesis that teachers believe that learner autonomy is implemented through activities outside the classroom was not justified.

The experience teachers have in teaching (years spent in profession) correlates with the aspects of learner autonomy in three ways: the more experienced teachers more frequently provide opportunities for students for self-reflection and self-evaluation, and the experienced teachers evaluate the students' prior language knowledge and proficiency level more often.

The research proved that LSP lessons are privileged and pioneering in forming and fostering language learner autonomy, as the students' professional knowledge can enrich and considerably contribute to the lessons. Despite the fact that teachers consider learner autonomy desirable and important, its implementation lags behind the belief.

As a result of the research, a summary of possible ways of promoting language learner autonomy in Hungarian higher education environment – inside and outside the classroom - has been drawn up.

<b>What can language teachers do?</b>	<b>What can language learners do?</b>
Share responsibility with the learner	Take part in planning the language learning process
Offer alternatives for choices and decisions in terms of the material, the pace of learning, methods, assessment	Make choices and well-informed decisions and give reasons for them
Involving students in decision making when arranging the course	Take learning as a joint venture and contribute to the organisation of it
Share the in-class tasks with the students (preparation for and organisation of tasks)	Take learning as a joint venture and contribute to its content and procedure
Reconsider the image of the student that he/she has (language level $\neq$ cognitive level)	Reconsider the self-image and strategies he/she has as a language learner
Encourage language learning activities outside the classroom and provides opportunities for learners to report on them in the classroom	Report on outside-the- classroom language exposure as a contribution to the lesson
Rely on and integrate into the lesson the professional knowledge of the student	Relate and link professional knowledge to language learning
Offer work forms that make students actively involved in the lesson	Actively take part in the lesson
Create an encouraging and relaxed atmosphere	Be a tolerant, patient, cooperative member of the learning community
Reflect on their job and expect others to do so	Reflect on their job and expect others to do so

To sum up the research findings, we can state that although language teachers seem to be aware of the significance of language learner autonomy and they know that it has a beneficial effect on the effectiveness of learning, they do not use the full potential of it; most of them do not take advantage of the pedagogical, organisational and methodological ways/opportunities available.



## **Conclusion**

One of the objectives of the research was to provide a systematic overview of Hungarian and international research findings about language learner autonomy and to interpret the findings for a higher education LSP teaching context. Links between constructivism and language teaching were presented and thus considerations of practical value were offered. Beliefs of language teachers on learner autonomy were revealed in the mixed method, deductive and exploratory research. This has led to an interpretation of the construct of learner autonomy, which can be used in further professional discourse and research.

The research contributed to our knowledge about teachers' beliefs and way of thinking. The hypotheses were fully or partly justified and provided several considerations of both theoretical and practical use. The research revealed factors that hinder fostering autonomy in the higher education language teaching and learning contexts. Based on the findings, pedagogical implications and proposals are presented on the topic.

The relevant latest professional literature was overviewed and used as an interpretational framework for the research. To operationalise the concept, further classroom research is needed. Classroom observations are necessary to see and evaluate teacher-student interaction when autonomy is implemented. A special research focus should be on LSP classes, where autonomy can be fostered to a greater extent. Further empirical data on teachers' beliefs and on teachers' autonomy would deepen our understanding of the issue.

As also asked by Bárdos (2015) we should further investigate whether autonomy promotes success in language learning or only correlates with the success. Like the level of language knowledge, the extent of autonomy is also difficult to measure. So based on the experience of this research, qualitative types of research and data collection should also be applied in further investigations.

Language learner autonomy and – in a wider context – the education of the future can only operate and successfully function in a flexible, adaptable environment that is sensitive to changes and is proactive and innovative at the same time. Education can perform its mission and the tasks assigned to it by society if it develops in a self-reflective, autonomous way. Its mission is to transfer collective knowledge and experience, creating values and promoting individual knowledge construction. The research results presented here can contribute to professional development of teachers, which should be based on self-

reflection and self-training. The findings might serve as a starting point for further research regarding higher education pedagogy, language pedagogy and LSP teaching.

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