Huszthy Viola – Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation – Abstract

Opportunities for Developing Learner Autonomy in Language Education – A Qualitative Study on Language Teachers' Attitudes and Practices Related to the Development of Learner Autonomy in the Context of Digital Transformation

The dissertation explores the possibilities for fostering learner autonomy based on the experiences of language teachers working in higher education, with special attention to the challenges of digital transformation. The central question of the research is how language teachers interpret their role in supporting learner autonomy, what methods they apply, and how they perceive the relationship between teacher-student collaboration and the interplay of teacher and learner autonomy.

The qualitative research, grounded in the naturalistic paradigm, draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten language teachers from the Centre for Foreign Languages of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. Content analysis was carried out through a combination of deductive and inductive coding, employing a self-developed coding framework and an additional psychological-pragmatic layer of analysis, which also represents a methodological innovation.

The main findings of the study offer new insights on several levels. Results indicate that the development of learner autonomy is strongly influenced by secondary school routines and hierarchical teacher-student relations that persist in higher education. The emergence of autonomy is most effectively supported by partnership, trust, indirect and moderate control, and reciprocity. The teacher assumes not a directive but a facilitative role – becoming a key figure who fosters students' independence through motivation, affective presence, and a trust-based relationship. The research highlights that control and autonomy are not opposites: consciously applied, moderate teacher control can actively promote the growth of learner autonomy.

The experience of the pandemic further underlines that in electronic learning environments, independence, self-discipline, and responsibility become particularly decisive, while informal and non-formal learning gain in importance. The development of self-assessment also emerges as a key factor: it strengthens students' self-reflection and sense of responsibility while reducing teacher overload.

One of the most significant insights of the research is that teacher autonomy – conceived as a combination of professional freedom, self-reflection, and resilience – serves as a model for students. The autonomous, reflective teacher exemplifies lifelong learning in practice.

The psychological and pragmatic analysis confirmed that autonomy-supportive educators display low control, high trust, and strong self-reflection. At the same time, it identified areas requiring further development, particularly in the use of digital environments and self-assessment practices.

Overall, the research produced both theoretical and practical outcomes: it reaffirmed the interactive, partnership-based nature of autonomy development and provided concrete guidance for teachers on how to support learner autonomy. Moreover, the coding framework and the interdisciplinary analytical model developed in this study can serve as methodological tools for future educational research.