Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích
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Bakalářská práce

Supporting autonomous English language learning

Podpora autonomního učení se anglického jazyka

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Anotace

Předkládaná bakalářská práce se zabývá konceptem autonomie při učení se anglického jazyka. S neustálými změnami ve světě a společnosti se autonomie stala jedním z klíčových témat v oblasti vzdělávání a je vnímána jako cesta k efektivnímu učení se cizího jazyka.

V teoretické části jsou vymezeny pojmy spojené s autonomií. Dále je poskytnut úvod do konceptu autonomie jako takového s důrazem na jeho aplikaci v kontextu učení se cizího jazyka. Empirická část prezentuje výsledky analýzy reflexivních prací studentů anglického jazyka na Pedagogické fakultě Jihočeské univerzity v Českých Budějovicích. Cílem je prozkoumat autonomní učení se anglického jazyka a strategie, které studenti využili ve svých osobních projektech vytvořené za účelem řešení svých vnímaných nedostatků v oblasti anglického jazyka.

Klíčová slova

autonomie žáka, učení se anglického jazyka, učební strategie, osobní projekty

Abstract

The bachelor thesis in hand explores the concept of autonomy in English language learning. With the constant changes in our world and society, learner autonomy has become one of the crucial topics in education and is considered a pathway to effective language learning.

The theoretical part defines the concepts and terms related to autonomy. Furthermore, it introduces the concept with a focus on its application within the context of language learning. The empirical part presents findings from the analysis of reflective works written by students of the English language at the Faculty of Education, University of South Bohemia. The aim of the study is to examine autonomous English language learning and the strategies employed by students in their personal projects to address their perceived shortcomings in their English language.

Keywords

learner autonomy, English language learning, learning strategies, personal projects

Acknowledgment

Table of Contents

1   Introduction

As new possibilities of gaining knowledge and enhancing language proficiency continue to open thanks to the constant changes in our world and society, the concept of learner autonomy has become one of the major topics of discussion. It has come to be considered a gateway to effective language learning, becoming one of the desirable goals within the field of education.

Despite the immense efforts of researchers and educators to describe, analyse and fully unravel this phenomenon, autonomy remains a complex, multifaceted concept that is relatively hard to grasp completely. Even so, its presence within language learning continues to be highly valued and recognised. While a full understanding of autonomy may not yet be possible, it does not stand in the way of those who aim to promote this concept and pursue its potential benefits. The question then lies in how much awareness has been raised in regard to the existence of this intricate notion – how many of those around us know that something such as autonomy exists? Not everyone may be aware of the presence of autonomy within themselves or in the learning processes they engage in. Therefore, promoting awareness and understanding of autonomy is one of the crucial steps in effectively fostering autonomy and autonomous behaviour.

The thesis in hand aims to explore the notion of autonomy in English language learning. The first part of the thesis opens with the introduction of lifelong learning, a concept that is closely related to autonomous learning, and continues with presenting the definition of autonomy and its characterization within the context of language learning.

The empirical part is based on an analysis of reflective works written by students of the English language at the Faculty of Education, University of South Bohemia. The main purpose of the study is to examine the notion of autonomous English language learning with the focus on the language learning strategies the students employed in their personal projects.

2   Lifelong learning

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.
– Lao Tzu

2.1   Defining lifelong learning

The idea that learning can take place anywhere and anytime or that it continues throughout every stage of our life has existed for several decades now. While some may be taken aback and imagine endless hours at school or other educational institutions upon hearing the term *lifelong learning*, the concept covers far more than just the kind of learning we usually experience at the early stages of our life. As written by Fisher (1999, p. 1) *"lifelong learning is more than adult education or training – it is a mindset and a habit for people to acquire… it refers to a society in which learning possibilities exist for those who want to learn"*.

The Commissions of European Communities define lifelong learning as *"all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence"* (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000, p. 2). They highlight the fact that people themselves are the driving force of knowledge in society and, thus, need to actively look and strive for it (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000). In relation to this, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) emphasises that the goal of teaching and learning should be for learners of any age *"to build up the attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to become more independent in thought and action, and also more responsible and co-operative in relation to other people"*.

The core idea of lifelong learning is that the knowledge and skills that we obtain at school make up only a small portion of what we truly need to lead a prosperous life – in other words, learning does not end with the successful

3

completion of elementary school or high school, nor does it become any less important after acquiring a university degree. Nevertheless, the essential foundation of lifelong learning still lies within basic education. This stage should ensure that young learners maintain a positive attitude towards learning and 'learn how to learn'. Knowing how to utilise this skill throughout their lifetime allows them to enhance their existing knowledge and skills and achieve further development. (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000)

Lifelong learning is commonly associated with one's personal growth and professional development and, consequently, with adult learning. Lindeman, an early adult educator, stated that *"The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings."* (Lindeman, 1926, p. 6). Simply put, lifelong learning supports the notion of learning as a never-ending process 'from cradle to grave' where everything is deeply interconnected (Strategie celoživotního učení ČR, 2007). No matter the form, anything can be considered a lifelong learning experience – be it hobbies, participation in volunteer work or extracurricular activities. (Kraiger & Wolfson, 2011)

While the idea of continuous learning can be traced back as far as to ancient Greece, it was not until the 1970s that the phenomenon gained greater attention (Fleming, 2011). With the concept being adopted by international organizations such as UNESCO, the interest in lifelong learning has been rapidly growing ever since (Yurdakul, 2017). At present, lifelong learning serves as one of the fundamental concepts recognized in both our society and education.

2.2   Forms of lifelong learning

Learning can occur in various settings and forms, often without the learner even being fully aware of it. According to Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000), as well as Strategie celoživotního učení ČR (2007), lifelong learning can be divided into three basic categories – *formal, non-formal* and *informal learning*.

4

Formal learning refers to learning that takes place in education or training institutions (the most common examples of where this form of learning happens are elementary and secondary schools together with colleges and universities). Learning here is approached systematically. It typically involves classroom teaching alongside a structured curriculum with learning objectives and organisational forms. Successful completion then leads to formally recognised degrees, diplomas and certifications. (Strategie celoživotního učení ČR, 2007)

Several authors pinpoint and often even resolve to criticising that traditional education systems are predominantly focused on formal learning (Stickler & Emke, 2011). This is, for instance, apparent in Illich's statement (1970, p. 7), saying that "*a major illusion on which the school system rests is that most learning is the result of teaching*". While formal settings do, indeed, contribute strongly to forming the foundation for learning, it is simply not enough. Lifelong learning brings the other two forms into the picture, emphasising that they also hold a significant role in the overall learning process – hence why they are considered no less important than formal learning. (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000)

Non-formal learning, contrary to formal learning, takes place outside of the traditional education structure and settings provided by education or training institutions. It can, nonetheless, happen within some organisational framework (for example, in the form of music, sports and art classes or tutoring) (Council of Europe, n.d.). Furthermore, upon completion, there are typically no formalised certifications. The goal of non-formal learning does not lie in acquiring a certification or a degree but in mastering particular activities, skills or gaining knowledge. (Strategie celoživotního učení ČR, 2007)

Non-formal learning includes a wide variety of activities, such as:

- organised leisure activities;
- language, computer, and requalification courses;
- training programs;

- workshops and seminars;
- internships;
- volunteer work etc.

Compared to formal learning, non-formal learning provides more freedom and can be adapted to individual needs, preferences as well as interests. For this reason, it is often considered a crucial element in successful adult learning (Stickler & Emke, 2011). By taking control and participating in non-formal activities, greater progress and development can be achieved than if relied only on formal learning. However, despite the increasing attention towards this form, it is frequently not recognised as 'real' learning and often ends up being overlooked. (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000)

As mentioned previously, the scope of learning in the concept of lifelong learning goes beyond that of just formal or non-formal. Unlike the previous two, **informal learning** is not organised and does not necessarily occur intentionally (the case of unintentional learning may commonly be found under the term *incidental* or *random*).

Informal learning is generally understood as a natural accompaniment of everyday life. It refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and skills through daily life experiences and activities that can take place at work, at home or even during leisure time (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000). This notion leads to the basic idea that people are constantly exposed to learning opportunities and situations, regardless of whether they actively seek them out or not.

Informal learning can take many forms – from participation in social activities and interactions with others to reading books and watching educational videos. One of the key characteristics of informal learning is that it often happens in relation to the learner's interests and is, therefore, commonly driven by motivation. For this reason, many bring to the fore the value of informal learning and argue that it deserves more attention. It comes as little or no

surprise then that it is often considered an essential component of lifelong learning. (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000)

3   Language learning and acquisition

In today's world, which continues to undergo rapid globalisation, learning a new language has long gone far beyond that of just acquiring a new skill. Knowing more than just one language means possessing a valuable asset that allows one to engage in cross-cultural exchanges and interactions on a deeper level. For this reason, one could argue that being able to communicate and connect with people of a different mother tongue has become a norm in our society – and so has language learning and acquisition.

3.1   Language learning or language acquisition?

It is a commonly known fact that the ability to speak a language is not something we are born with but rather what we must acquire through exposure and practice. Besides the one we call our mother tongue, we may learn a new language at any point in our life – which we then refer to as a *second* or *foreign language*. According to Krashen (1982) and one of his hypotheses about second language acquisition, there are two distinct ways of how to develop competencies in another language: through *language acquisition* or *language learning*.

Contrary to some theorists and their belief that the process of acquisition is related mainly to children and learning then to adults, the *acquisition-learning hypothesis* claims that the ability to 'acquire' a language stays throughout our life. (Krashen, 1982)

Krashen (1982) describes **language acquisition** as a *subconscious process*. By this, he implies that learners are usually not fully aware of the fact that they are undergoing the process of language acquisition. According to him, they naturally 'pick up' the language while using it as a means of communication. In other words, they acquire the given language through exposure to it.

Contrary to language acquisition, **language learning** involves a deliberate effort to acquire knowledge and skills in the target language. Learning, as a

general term, is understood as a *"process of getting an understanding of something by studying it or by experience"* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). From the definition, it is apparent that language learning is a *conscious process*. Brown further describes the term by saying that learning is *"the involvement of storage systems, memory, and cognitive organization; a change in behaviour; the result of practice; the retention of information or skills"* (Brown, 2014, p. 4).

One of the differences between language learning and language acquisition lies in the way in which they occur. As mentioned above, language learning involves the conscious participation of the learner, whereas language acquisition is more of a natural, unconscious process. When learning, a structured curriculum is followed and the focus is placed on the language's rules and structures. As a result, learners gain insight into the grammar and utilise this knowledge when using the language. On the other hand, the output produced through language acquisition is generated by subconscious processes. The acquirers are generally not aware of the grammatical rules they have 'picked up' and depend on their intuition, their 'feeling', and what 'sounds right' to them. (Krashen, 1982)

Krashen (1981) stated an interesting point in one of his works that error correction, which usually takes place in language learning, may actually hinder the process of language acquisition. He argued that learners who rely excessively on rules and overlook their 'intuition' can develop anxiety and refrain from taking risks and using the language for fear of making a mistake. Comparing it to those who, on the other hand, depend solely on their 'feeling', he claims that despite the possible low performance in grammar, they are more likely to acquire the language better and use more complex constructions.

Brown (2014), similarly to Krashen, discusses the importance of natural exposure to the language in order to acquire the target language effectively. While both of them support this notion, they also emphasise that deliberate language learning is valuable in second language acquisition and should not be

disregarded. As Krashen (1981) implies in the following statement of his, the competencies and knowledge gained through language acquisition and language learning should both take place when they are necessary, showing that there is an inherent connection between the two of them.

"*The optimal user is the performer who uses learning as a real supplement to acquisition, monitoring when it is appropriate and when it does not get in the way of communication (e.g. prepared speech and writing). Very good optimal users may, in fact, achieve the illusion of native speaker competence in written performance. They "keep grammar in its place", using it to fill gaps in acquired competence when such monitoring does not get in the way of communication.*" (Krashen, 1981, pp. 4-5)

4   Autonomy in language learning

*It is important to recognize that autonomy is not an approach enforcing a particular way of learning. It is, rather, an **educational goal**.*

– Benson (2011, p. 71)

Acknowledging the importance of learning as a means of adapting to the ever-changing world, especially in the current information age, has led to a significant focus on lifelong learning and concepts of a similar or related nature. This includes learner autonomy which has become highly relevant in our society and education.

4.1   Defining learner autonomy

Despite the efforts of many to establish a clear definition, learner autonomy remains one of the concepts that are difficult to describe precisely. The reason for the prevailing inconsistency in the definition lies partly in its complexity as well as the existence of similar terms – such as self-instruction or out-of-class learning. Moreover, the expanding publications and resources continue to debate over questions such as whether to look at autonomy as an ability or behaviour; whether to characterise it as a learner responsibility or learner control; or whether teacher autonomy affects the development of learner autonomy at all or not (Little, 2003). This leads to a variety of definitions of the term in different contexts and approaches.

Focus on language learning

Learner autonomy is a concept commonly discussed in the context of language learning and acquisition. In the literature concerned with this topic, countless authors, educators and researchers frequently resolve to referencing Holec's definition of *learner autonomy*. In his seminar report, Holec defines learner autonomy as "*the ability to take charge of one's own learning*" (1981, quoted in Benson, 2007; Little, 1991; Dafei, 2007). According to some, this could be regarded as the most widely used and quoted definition as it provides a

relatively accurate description of what the term refers to (Benson, 2007; Dafei, 2007).

Gabrielsen (1990) proceeds to summarise Holec's arguments by saying that learner autonomy is characterised by learner's *willingness* to take charge of their own learning and to proceed on their own accord with the following:

- setting personal aims and objectives;
- selecting study methods, techniques and strategies;
- monitoring and organising their work;
- evaluating their whole learning process and outcomes.

Despite the relatively common agreement that Holec's definition covers the main areas in which a learner may exercise control during the learning processes, many put forth additional dimensions and aspects that need to be considered in relation to this topic. Benson (2011), for instance, argued that the definition does not sufficiently address the learner's affective engagement with the learning process. He contends that autonomy in learning goes beyond the mere organization of learning and needs to be viewed from the psychological and cognitive dimensions as well, drawing attention to the *"cognitive processes underlying effective self-management of learning"* (Benson, 2011, p. 60). Little's definition encompasses this psychological dimension, saying that *"autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning."* (Little, 2011, p. 4)

If put simply, an **autonomous learner** is aware of the learning in progress and is actively involved in it. In the context of language learning, this would mean that while striving to enhance their language skills, they take over the role of the decision-maker in what, when, and how they want to learn. As stated in the report from the Nordic workshop on developing autonomous learning in foreign language classrooms, *"An autonomous learner knows how to learn and can use*

this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage in her/his life." (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990, p. 102). They make intentional choices and actively create their own learning opportunities, leading to a more personalised course of learning.

Learner autonomy, as described above, is treated as a learner's attribute. This means that it is viewed as a form of an internal aptitude, a capacity that the learner possesses and can, thus, develop and strengthen over time (Benson, 2007). By supporting this thought, people such as Holec, Benson or Little suggest that anyone is capable of fostering autonomy. While a large majority in the field agrees with this notion that autonomy refers to a capacity, it is possible to come across the term described as, for instance, *situations* in which learners direct their own learning outside of the conventional classrooms, independent of teachers and institutions. (Dickinson, 1987, as cited in Benson, 2011)

Considering the more agreed view on the term among authors, as well as the nature of this thesis, the concept will be approached from the perspective of Holec's description and its key element "to take charge of one's own learning" for the rest of the thesis.

4.2   Autonomy in practice

In the pursuit of finding ways to understand better and foster learner autonomy, researchers and educators have explored various approaches concerning this phenomenon in the field of education. In practice, fostering autonomy means a complex set of actions, methodologies and practices. It requires the implementation of various strategies and approaches aiming to help and empower learners to nurture their innate ability to take charge of their own learning.

Benson (2011) provides valuable insights into this topic. One of his contributions is a framework for understanding the application of autonomy in language learning, proposing that the practices contributing to fostering autonomy can be classified under these six interdependent classes:

- Resource-based approaches,

- Technology-based approaches,

- Learner-based approaches,

- Classroom-based approaches,

- Curriculum-based approaches,

- Teacher-based approaches.

The following section presents a brief introduction to these approaches, showing some of the ways used to support and foster learner autonomy. Moreover, learner-based approaches include a section dedicated to learning strategies.

4.2.1   Resource-based approaches

In the realm of fostering autonomy, resource-based approaches refer to practices that focus on the independent interaction of the learner with human, physical or digital language learning resources (Benson, 2011). The emphasis is placed on the significance of providing learners with a wide range of resources, creating opportunities for them to self-direct their learning and delve into autonomy through experimentation and discovery. Consequently, the types of materials perceived as more ideal involve tasks that guide learners in self-discovery and self-evaluation regarding their language learning (Smith, 2015).

A key aspect of resource-based approaches involves acknowledging the value of having diverse resources and materials available to learners. By presenting a more comprehensive range of options, learners are encouraged to embrace and explore various sources, and engage with the ones that align with their interests, learning styles, and language goals.

Resource-based approaches highlight the importance of cultivating learners' ability to locate, select and use appropriate materials and practices (Smith, 2015). In a way, the objective lies in encouraging learners to question what is presented in front of them, prompting them to actively seek new tools of learning. Instead of passively accepting the resources they are given or

encounter, they should be able to decide for themselves whether to use the resource or not. Through this process, learners increase the chances of using resources that meet their specific needs and are, therefore, more relevant, authentic, and suitable for them and their language goals.

4.2.2   Technology-based approaches

The advancement in technology and constant growth in the number of available digital tools has paved the way for new, alternative possibilities in the field of education. It has given rise to technology-based approaches that make use of the potential these advancements offer in promoting and fostering learner autonomy.

Technology-based approaches could be categorized within a broader scope of resource-based approaches. However, they are addressed separately for their rapidly evolving nature and the commonly asserted significance associated with technology in autonomous learning (Benson, 2011). The approaches involve, for instance, CALL (computer-assisted language learning), digital platforms, online communities, WebQuests and Chatbots, language learning apps or multimedia resources that create more interactive learning environments. Each of these then offers two very important things: the development of learners' control over their learning content and open opportunities for collaboration and interaction with other learners. (Smith, 2015) Moreover, materials are easily accessible to people regardless of their location and time, and personalized feedback is often provided, which, as a result, can engage learners to actively monitor their learning and track their learning progress.

Research studies exploring the impact of technology on learner autonomy and the relationship between these two frequently present one interesting, shared viewpoint. They propose that although learners can utilize new technologies, they often require guidance in developing the ability to make successful use of the technology available to them. This emphasizes the important role of teachers in providing support and assistance to learners during their journey

towards autonomous learning. (Reinders, 2018; Ankan and Bakla, 2011, as cited in Smith, 2015)

4.2.3   Learner-based approaches

As the name suggests, learner-based approaches are oriented toward the learner and their growth. These approaches align with Holec's definition of autonomy, which presents learners as the subject and, thus, as the central focus of autonomy and autonomous learning. Whilst the previous two approaches mainly sought to create and provide opportunities that would allow learners to develop and foster their autonomy, learner-based approaches aim to address the learners' development directly. By shifting the focus on the learners' growth and their skills, these approaches recognize the psychological and behavioural changes that happen within learners.

Learner-based approaches emerge from the combination of *learner training* and *good language learner* concepts (Benson, 2011). As a whole, it is often classified under the term 'learner development' which Sheerin defines as "*cognitive and affective development involving increasing awareness of oneself as a learner and an increasing willingness and ability to manage one's own learning*" (Sheerin, 1997, p. 60). The primary goal then lies in helping language users become better language learners.

> *"In effect, 'successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous."*
>
> – Wenden (1991; quoted in Benson, 2011, p. 158)

Learning strategies are an inherent part of learner-based approaches. They serve as tools essential for the development of learner autonomy, equipping learners with the necessary skills and techniques. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, strategies are described as a means

through which language users mobilize and balance their resources and activate skills and procedures, all for the purpose of accomplishing tasks in the most effective and purposeful way possible (Council of Europe, 2001). Furthermore, strategies are meant to *"make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations"* (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

According to Janíková (2003), professional literature defines strategies mostly as mental plans that are created and followed in order to reach a certain goal. They are frequently related to activities that individuals choose to perform during their learning processes and conscious, goal-driven behaviours that allow learners to enhance their learning (Brown, 2014). However, Benson (2011), as well as Janíková (2003), cautions that the effectiveness of learner strategy use in autonomy should not be treated as absolute, for it is highly subjective.

The classification of learning strategies in relation to language learning can vary across different sources of literature. The categorization employed by Oxford seems to be the most common and referenced, appearing in literature by authors such as Brown, Benson, or Janíková. Oxford (1990) divides learning strategies into two major classes – direct and indirect.

- *Direct strategies*: Deal directly with the target language itself.
- *Indirect strategies*: Approaches supporting language learning without directly involving the language, centred around the learner's internal processes.

Both classes are then further subdivided into a total of six interrelated groups:

- *Memory strategies:* Techniques for storing and retrieving information.
- *Cognitive strategies*: Mental processes used to understand, transform and produce the language.
- *Compensation strategies*: Used to overcome limitations or gaps in language proficiency or knowledge.

- *Metacognitive strategies*: Help learners think about, understand and coordinate their learning process and the way they learn.

- *Affective strategies*: Focus on managing emotions, motivations and attitudes.

- *Social strategies*: Involve interaction with others.

These strategies may subsequently be applied across various areas and skills. This includes the *four language skills*, also known as the *Big Four*: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. (Oxford, 1990)

		Sub-strategies	Examples of use in practice
Language learning strategies	**Direct**	Memory	Using associations; practicing with flashcards; reviewing.
		Cognitive	Translating; reading books; conversing with native speakers.
		Compensation	Looking for clues or guessing; asking for clarification; using gestures, synonyms.
	Indirect	Metacognitive	Setting goals; seeking learning opportunities; self-reflection.
		Affective	Managing stress and anxiety; positive self-talk; building self-confidence.
		Social	Participating in language exchange programs; engaging in online discussions.

Table 4.2.1 Language learning strategies, their division and examples

4.2.4   Classroom-based approaches

Classroom-based approaches, together with the remaining two, belong to approaches related to changes to the conventional educational structures. In this case, the focus lies on creating a supportive environment where learners have room to exercise control over their learning contents and procedures. This

should be achieved through collaboration and interaction with other participants within the classroom context, namely teachers and other learners. (Smith, 2015)

Numerous studies and experiments have provided evidence that learners are inherently capable of showing control over various aspects of their learning if they are given the right opportunity and support. It is believed that this capacity is more likely to be enhanced within the classroom than outside of it; when among other learners and with the support of teachers. The studies also suggest that by granting learners a degree of control in the process of planning and evaluating their classroom learning, their autonomy has a better chance of being developed and fostered. (Benson, 2011) By engaging in collaborative work, exchanging ideas and negotiating, sharing responsibilities as well as contributing to the overall process, learners are encouraged to develop not only their ability to set goals and take charge of their own learning, but also improve in the skill areas useful in their life, such as communication, cooperation and problem-solving skills.

For classroom-based approaches to work, mutual understanding and trust between the teacher and the learners needs to be built and maintained. However, implementing this approach into traditional classrooms as we have them now, that are often constrained by their structure, still poses various challenges to the educational system. (Benson, 2011)

4.2.5   Curriculum-based approaches

Curriculum-based approaches are built on a similar concept as classroom-based approaches with the difference that the area of learner control is extended to a higher, curricular level. These approaches raise an essential question about how conventional classroom practices shape learners' perception of their role; whether the "minute-by-minute routines" reinforce autonomy in any way or whether they discourage it instead by leaving little to no room for learners to make independent choices of their own (Crabbe, 1993, as cited in Benson, 2014).

The curriculum-based approaches support the notion of the so-called *process syllabus* – a *"negotiated component of the syllabus"* (Simons and Wheeler, 1995, quoted in Benson, 2014, p. 178) during which learners take over the role of the major decision-maker concerning their learning content, procedure, and evaluation. According to this perspective, the learning contents should not be predetermined but rather emerge through communicative and collaborative processes between the teacher and the learner. (Benson, 2014)

While the literature provides little documentation of the process syllabus being used in practice, there are numerous examples of initiatives where learners have exercised control and responsibility at the curriculum level. The cases commonly associated with these initiatives are *learning modules*. The direction of these courses is achieved through negotiation between the teacher and the learner – the learner takes over the lead and creates their own learning plans, determines and also evaluates their learning process, and the teacher, in turn, assumes the role of a 'mere' facilitator, guide and counsellor, providing support when needed. In some cases, learners are asked to keep a log or a diary as a record of their work, leading them towards the development of self-awareness and self-reflection. (Benson, 2014) As such, these approaches could be considered more suitable for slightly more experienced learners who are capable of exercising a certain degree of responsibility and control.

4.2.6   Teacher-based approaches

Teacher-based approaches acknowledge the teachers' crucial role in the process of fostering learner autonomy, for they are supposed to provide assistance and guidance along the learners' path towards independent learning, especially at the early stages. According to Voller (1997, as cited in Benson, 2014), primary teacher roles in autonomous learning can be reduced to the following three: facilitator, counsellor, and resource. As a *facilitator*, a teacher is seen as someone who provides learning support; as a *counsellor*, the one-to-one interaction between the teacher and the learner is brought to attention; and as a *resource*, the primary emphasis lies on the teacher's role as the source of knowledge and expertise.

In order to effectively encourage and nurture autonomy in learners, more than merely creating and maintaining a supportive learning environment is required. Teachers need to understand the principles and practices of autonomy and what it takes to be autonomous – in other words, they, themselves, *"must recognise and assert their own autonomy"* (Benson, 2014, p. 187).

The fundamental concept behind teacher-based approaches lies in the notion that to successfully foster autonomy in learners, the autonomy within teachers has to be addressed. However, the autonomy here refers not only to the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", but extends to a much broader scope, including teachers' professional practice and decision-making. It is considered a crucial aspect of teacher autonomy to be willing to make changes to conventional classrooms for the sake of creating an environment in which learners can exercise more control over their own learning. As written by Aoki, *"If learner autonomy is the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own learning... teacher autonomy, by analogy, can be defined as the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching."* (2002, quoted in Benson, 2014, p. 191).

4.3   Factors affecting learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is characteristic of its great complexity, and so is the process leading to its development and fostering. There are numerous factors that influence and, most of the time, also precondition the development and 'growth' of learners' autonomy. These factors may be separated into two main categories – *internal*, referring to the psychological and cognitive aspects within learners; and *external*, the factors that 'surround' learners and, consequently, impact their learning experience. (Benson, 2014)

The common **internal factors** addressed in literature concerned with learner autonomy include *motivation, self-efficacy, learning strategies*, and learners' *attitudes* towards language learning. As written in the European Framework, attitudes and personality have a major effect on not only the learner's level of

involvement in the communicative activities in the target language but also their ability to learn. (Council of Europe, 2001)

In relation to motivation, the emphasis is frequently placed on the importance of both *intrinsic motivation*, which is driven by one's own desire to engage in an activity for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment, and appropriate *extrinsic motivation*. Whilst some perspectives consider extrinsically motivated learners to be invariantly nonautonomous, Ryan and Deci argue that many instances of extrinsic motivation can be associated with an autonomous learner. (Ryan and Deci, 2002) An example of such behaviour would be engaging in a certain activity on the belief that it holds value for one's chosen career or goal (such as enhancing language proficiency), which certainly differs from someone doing the same activity simply for a monetary reward or praise.

External factors are primarily associated with the *learning environment, the people within this environment, instructional approaches,* or *available resources*. These factors exhibit relation to the approaches discussed in the previous chapter; namely resource-, technology-, classroom-, curriculum-, and teacher-based approaches.[1] This connection highlights the significance of these factors and emphasizes the deliberate efforts of educators and researchers to address them, as well as modify them, in order to create better conditions to foster learner autonomy.

4.4   Measuring autonomy – is it possible?

The concept of autonomy has received considerable attention in both educational research and practice. Numerous reports advocate for the correlation between positive results and autonomy, which in turn reinforces the notion that learner autonomy is one of the legitimate and desirable goals in the field of education (Benson, 2011; Little, D., Ridley, J., Ushioda, E., 2003; Reinders, 2018). As the interest in this concept grows and efforts are made to find ways to

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[1] refer to chapter 4.2 Autonomy in practice

evoke autonomy in individuals, one very important question arises: Can autonomy be effectively measured and assessed or not?

Benson (2010) came up with a simple hypothesis that if we are capable of asserting that someone seems to display *more* or *less* autonomous behaviour than others or that it is possible to *further* develop autonomy and become *more* autonomous, there should, in principle, be a way to somehow measure it. While autonomy can, indeed, be 'put on a scale' to a certain extent, it is unlikely that the measurements will ever yield data that could be considered one hundred per cent accurate or definitive. (Benson, 2011) The primary reason behind that would be the complex and multidimensional nature of the concept in question. Additionally, the fact that autonomy can manifest and show in entirely different ways renders it a highly individualized matter. As a result, assessing autonomy involves and requires a degree of subjectivity and reliance on 'intuitive senses' to discern what is and is not part of autonomous behaviour. This, however, means that interpretations of autonomy can vary among individuals, which poses challenges for the measurement – what one person perceives as a display of autonomy, another may not.

A fascinating phenomenon demonstrating one of these challenges associated with measuring autonomy is the **mask of autonomous behaviour**. Coined by researchers Breen and Mann, this metaphorical term describes instances where learners, often driven by the purpose to 'please' the teacher who seeks to foster the learners' autonomy, exhibit behaviour that seems autonomous but, in reality, is not. In other words, they "*give up their autonomy to put on the mask of autonomous behaviour*" (Breen and Mann, 1997, as cited in Benson, 2014, p. 67). In such cases, learners may genuinely appear to be autonomous on the surface, exercising control over their learning and showing other signs related to the concept of autonomy – all the while their actions and choices are actually influenced by various factors that do not necessarily align with autonomous behaviours. These factors can encompass a variety of influences, both external and internal, depending on the situation and/or the learner; from teacher

expectations and curriculum requirements to the learner's beliefs about learning, their motivation or self-confidence. (Benson, 2014)

It is clearly a paradox to claim that one can 'test the untestable'.

– Dam & Legenhausen (2010, p. 120)

While considerable efforts have been made to devise instruments and frameworks for measuring autonomy, researchers themselves frequently deem measurement an action that goes against autonomy's inherent nature. As written by Lamb (2010), the aim of these unyielding efforts would not be to measure autonomy for its own sake. It is not to define learner's abilities to rank or group them; rather, it is meant to serve the purpose of raising learner's self-awareness regarding their autonomy and helping educators acknowledge, identify and understand what encompasses this concept, allowing them to adapt their teaching to promote its development.

5   Empirical part

5.1   Aims

The presented empirical part aims to analyse the collected reflective works written by students of the English language at the Faculty of Education, University of South Bohemia. The main purpose of the study is to examine the notion of autonomous English language learning. The analysis will focus on identifying the areas the students subjectively consider as their weaknesses in their language learning and look into the individual projects devised in order to address the shortcomings in question. Moreover, the study seeks to identify the methods and strategies the students selected for their learning. The students' opinions and feelings regarding the outcomes of their projects will be addressed as well.

Additionally, the empirical part will present comments and data acquired from the student works that could be associated with the thesis topic and the concept of autonomy. This is done with the intention to explore the presence of autonomy and autonomous behaviour and gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of the students regarding their English language learning.

5.2   Methodology and context

For the empirical part, a qualitative approach was adopted. Specifically, content analysis was chosen – the analysis was done on works written by students as a part of their final assignment in one of their first-year courses. At the beginning of the course, the students were assigned to address their strengths and weaknesses regarding their English language learning and set a personal learning aim they would work towards throughout the semester. Near the end of the course, they reflected on their learning process and evaluated the progress in reaching their aim through a reflective essay. These essays are the student works the thesis in hand works with.

112 students that had taken the course were contacted for the purpose of acquiring the essays for the analysis. As such, 35 works were successfully collected – 12 were written in the academic year 2020/21 and the remaining 13 belong to the first years of 2022/23. The student works were collected and utilized for this thesis with the explicit consent of the respective authors.

With the aim of the empirical part, the analysis process focused on identifying four main elements – students' perceived weaknesses, the learning aims they had set for themselves for the semester, the outcomes, and the strategies and methods the students employed to achieve their goal. The second part of the analysis was then oriented towards identifying any signs possibly related to autonomy, autonomous behaviour and learner awareness.

5.3   Data analysis and results

While reflective works serve as a useful source of information regarding the student's personal thoughts and beliefs, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the chosen analysis approach. Firstly, the information is specific to the group of students whose works were collected for the thesis – therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts and people. Secondly, the approach entails that subjectivity takes place during the analysis in order to interpret the data as close to the authors' intended meaning as possible.

Before proceeding with the results, it is also necessary to note that the students' reflective works did not always contain all the data that was supposed to be obtained from the analysis. In several cases, the authors wrote about what they personally think is generally the best way to enhance the English language skills. The personal projects were not addressed, nor was it specified in any way which methods and strategies they, themselves, employed to reach the aim they had set for the semester. There were also instances where the student's perceived weaknesses did not explicitly connect to the mentioned methods. In the situation where the project strategies were not directly addressed but the author included other ways they had personally used to improve their English proficiency, the

information was classified as the learning strategies they had employed in their projects.

Weaknesses/ shortcomings	Project strategies/methods	Personal learning aim	Achievement
33	17	24	24

Table 5.3 Number of information appearances in the student works

In total, 33 out of the 35 students mentioned their subjectively perceived weaknesses/shortcomings in their English language learning. 34 students talked about what approaches they had tried or had been effective for them, specifically; out of that, only 17 focused directly on the methods/strategies used in their personal projects. 24 students mentioned what their personal learning aims for the semester were and the same number, 24, commented on the extent to which they reached their respective goals.[2]

5.3.1   Weaknesses/shortcomings

	Reading	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Affective factors	Comprehension	Other
🟧	1	12	2	4	11	12	4	10	0	4
🟦	6	6	9	4	7	0	1	2	6	5
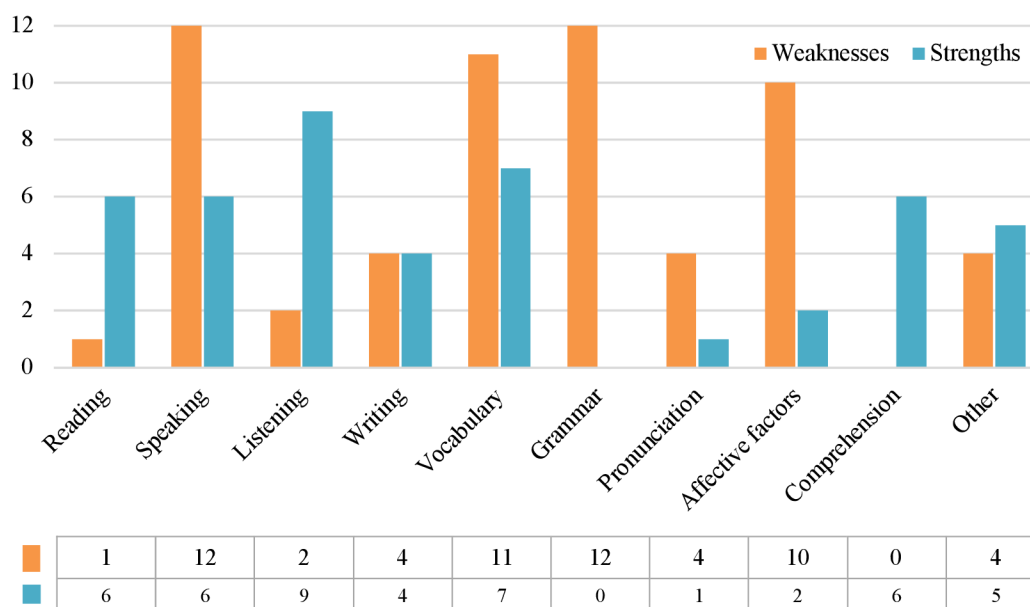
Figure 5.3.1.1 Areas the students perceived as their weaknesses/shortcomings or strengths

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[2] The table in Appendices (Appendix 1) offers a more detailed overview of what information could be obtained from each reflective work.

In addition to the main focus (the areas which the students personally consider as the most problematic), this section will also address the students' perceived strengths in order to provide a comparison between the two.

Throughout the reflective works, over 10 areas altogether could be identified in relation to the students' weaknesses or strengths. The ones that appeared in the essays less than three times were grouped into the 'Other' category. This, for weaknesses, would include *spelling* and *excessive reliance on the 'feeling' when using English*. As for strengths, the 'Other' category consists of *the ability to think in English*, *translation*, and the fact that *English feels natural* to them.

From the chart at the beginning of the sub-chapter, it is rather apparent that the areas which seem to be the most problematic are, if sorted out by frequency, *speaking* (12), *grammar* (12), *vocabulary* (11) and *affective factors* (10).

While **speaking** and **vocabulary** belong to the major areas considered as weaknesses, they also appeared the most frequently as strengths immediately after listening. Interestingly, the combination of these two as weaknesses within one work occurred 5 times, which only goes on to show the possible connection between one's vocabulary and the proficiency or confidence in speaking.

Those who perceived speaking as their weakness often associated this shortcoming with limited practice opportunities, especially at school. This is shown, for example, in the following sentence from one of the student works[3]: *"In comparison to other activities, speaking in school was highly neglected."*

More common, however, was the correlation to the affective factors, such as the fear of speaking with others due to anxiety or nervousness.

> *"I am also scared of doing mistakes, so when I have opportunity to speak and improve my skills I do not usually use that chance."*

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[3] All the excerpts from the student works presented in this thesis are quoted without any change to the original text. Some quotations may, therefore, contain grammatical errors, misspellings or other linguistic deviations present in the students' writing.

"My weakness is speaking because I am really shy and when I don't have to speak I will not."

"My fear of speaking is almost more like anxiety."

It is no surprise then that **affective factors** hold the fourth position of most appeared weaknesses, given that the majority of students who perceived speaking as their shortcoming addressed the affective factors at the same time. Apart from nervousness and anxiety, the factors included, for instance, motivation, lack of self-confidence or fear of being judged.

"Sometimes I lose motivation for improving, and because I am a lazy person, motivation is quite essential to me… it plays a big part in my studying approach."

"The obstacle is my fear of being judged and laughed at by other people if I said something wrong."

Curiously enough, compared to other areas, no one considered **grammar** their strong suit. A common impression concerning grammar was that the students learnt English mainly 'outside of school', through acquisition rather than learning. They had developed a 'feeling' for the language and use English mostly intuitively – this subsequently means that not much attention is directed towards grammar, hence why this area can be found problematic.

"My weakness is that most of my English is self-learned and from social media, so it's not really proper (by which I mean, it's more of conversion English than formal English) and my grammar sometimes falls short thanks to that."

"My biggest weakness is grammar. It's just that I have a lot of experience of talking and reading, that I just go by feel or just by remembering that sentence."

"I'd say my weakness is acknowledging the rules of English. What do I mean by that? Well basically I always relied heavily on my feeling... I do what my guts tell me to."

As for **writing** and **pronunciation**, that appeared a lot less than the previously discussed areas, not much was usually said with respect to these. Most of the time, the two were only addressed as shortcomings and something the students would like to work on and improve.

Quite a number of students were confident about their *listening, reading* and *language comprehension* skills and only a few viewed these as their weaknesses. This could be related to the fact that almost all of the students reported engagement with the English language through various activities that, in practice, frequently involve reading and listening. The activities included watching movies and listening to music to more subtle interactions such as using social media.

"I think my biggest strength is my extensive knowledge... which I constantly expand by playing video games, watching movies, and reading books."

"I learned most of the phrases and words from watching films since I was 14."

"Honestly, most of my English comes from the fact that I spend a lot of time on computer, which means playing games in English, watching series in English and since I do programming, a lot of commands and code are also in English."

"I listen to music, watch films, or play PC games – all of that in English."

5.3.2   Personal learning aims

Apart from addressing the weaknesses and strengths, each of the students was assigned to set their personal learning aim they would work towards throughout the semester. In general, their goals were based on the areas they subjectively considered as their shortcomings. However, as it has been mentioned before, not all students focused their reflective essays on their personal aims and projects within the course. Therefore, this section will work exclusively with the data related to the personal aims and projects addressed in the works of 24 out of 35 students. Most of the time, the aims were obtained through deeper analysis and interpretation of the text, for they were not explicitly mentioned.

Upon categorizing the students' personal aims, it was possible to sort them into two groups based on the way the students formed the aim. These groups have been labelled as *general aims* and *specific aims* for the clarity of the analysis.

General aims refer to those that the students set to address the whole broad areas they had perceived as their shortcomings. This means that what they mentioned as their weakness was directly the subject of their aim – if the shortcoming was listening, then the aim was to improve listening; if the perceived weakness was their grammar, then the aim was to work on grammar. This approach appeared in the majority of the student works.

> *"My main aim for this semester was to improve my pronunciation."*

> *"My personal aim was to improve my grammar and vocabulary."*

> *"I decided to improve my listening skill during this semester."*

However, many of the aims categorized into this group are the ones that required a more in-depth text analysis. Therefore, some of the students may have actually set an aim that would be regarded as specific; they just did not bring up the aim in their reflective works.
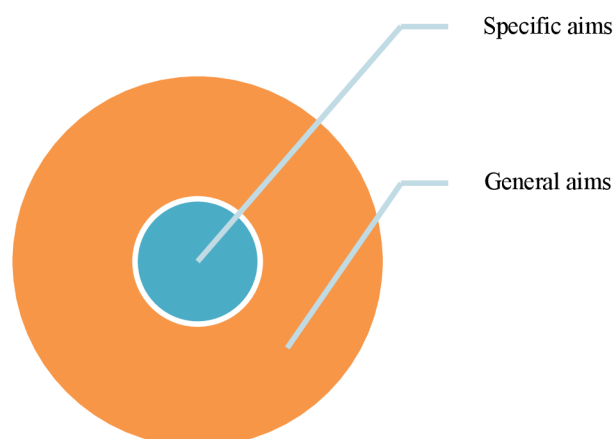
Figure 5.3.2.1 The relationship between general and specific aims

The **specific aims** can be considered a subset of general aims, representing the narrower objectives within a larger goal. Instead of addressing the weakness as a whole, the students directed their aim towards doing specific tasks and activities related to the areas of their shortcomings. This approach was less common than the previous one and appeared only four times. A possible explanation for that could be that a broader aim may be easier to think of.

"My aim for this semester is simple I must force myself to speak more."

"I evaluated that my biggest weakness is speaking, and I set a goal to regularly read English texts out loud."

5.3.3   Learning strategies and methods

In order to achieve their personal learning aims, the students utilized a variety of learning strategies and methods. After distinguishing between those explicitly employed for the personal projects and the ones the students mentioned to have used in their language learning in general, a total of 25 different means of learning was recorded.

In the case the students did not directly address the strategies within their projects but did mention other ways they had personally used to improve their English proficiency, the information was classified as the learning strategies

they had chosen for the semester. This was done on the condition that there was a connection between the approach in question and the weaknesses the student addressed.

The following section first focuses on the learning strategies in relation to the various learning areas the students recognized as their shortcomings. In the second part, Oxford's classification of language learning strategies is adopted to present a further analysis and categorization.

Language learning strategies and the students' weaknesses

Chapter 5.3.1 discussed the areas which the students subjectively considered as their weaknesses or shortcomings. In summary, the results from the analysis showed that the most problematic areas for the students were speaking and grammar, followed by vocabulary, affective factors, writing and pronunciation. Listening and reading, on the other hand, were more often addressed as strengths rather than weaknesses.

Most of the students who decided to focus on their **speaking skills** chose the same method: to engage in conversations with other people. The difference between some of the strategies was in the means used to achieve the goal. Usually, the students mentioned talking with their friends who do not speak Czech. Interestingly, one of them also practised with their Czech peers, saying that they simply felt comfortable switching to English within their friend group. None of the other students reported anything similar.

"Nowadays I mainly improve my English at the dorm or school by talking to Erasmus students."

"I have a few foreign friends, and even with my Czech friends, we sometimes talk in English, just because we feel comfortable doing so."

Very common was the use of video games as the medium to talk to people; specifically, multiplayer online games where people from different countries can

play together. Some students pointed out the accessibility of this strategy, as well as it being fun to practice. Additionally, the 'gaming environment' was viewed as friendly, allowing students to feel less burdened when speaking.

"I was trying to speak more in English. I was talking with people I played games,"

"I think I should try to improve myself in this friendly space, where I do not need to be afraid of making mistakes."

"I think speaking with some random people I met while playing games is the best way to start to speak more and more confidently because I am not nervous as much as if I had to speak to teacher."

Although less often, the university lessons led by native speakers were brought up as well. The students either stated that this method worked well for them, for they do not have anyone else to practice speaking with, or realized that they prefer talking in settings outside of school.

"I tried to speak more with our native speaker teacher Mr. Long but it was harder for me than to speak with people I played games with."

"I do not have many people around me who can (or want to) speak English, so the English lessons with a native speaker at our university have been the most significant help in that area."

The same students who mentioned having trouble speaking with others due to their shyness or anxiety or emphasized the issue of not having people around them to speak in English with also used the strategy of practising alone.

"It may sound weird, but sometimes I try to talk to myself to see if I can speak smoothly."

"I was also speaking to myself when I was doing some random things. I think it helps a lot too because I can hear myself, how I talk."

The students who set an aim to practice their **pronunciation** adopted a similar strategy by reading English texts out loud whenever they had the opportunity to do so. Additionally, one of the students mentioned watching movies, saying that the process of learning how to pronounce words correctly also takes place while listening to the spoken language itself.

"It is much easier for me to actually listen and learn from movie or series than it is from some kind of coursebook… I can also learn the pronunciation right on the first try and I don't really have to think about it that much."

In order to enhance **grammar**, the students mostly relied on coursebooks and exercises as their primary resources. Some of the websites they used for this purpose were, for example, cs.speaklanguages.com, umimeanglicky.cz or helpforenglish.cz. Only two students adopted a different approach to their grammar study, both choosing the same strategy to practice verb tenses. The strategy involved heightened attention to the tenses within the texts they were reading, followed by their classification into the corresponding categories. The only difference between the two approaches was that one of the students used articles as their resource, while the other chose to read a book.

"I quite enjoy reading in English but the difference here was the way I read it. My concentration went mostly to tenses and words I did not know. I always wrote them down to remember them and make my vocabulary bigger."

Books and articles were also utilised by those who had set an aim to expand their **vocabulary**. The students commonly employed the strategy of writing down new words they encountered while reading and then occasionally reviewing the new vocabulary in order to memorise it. The same approach was implemented for words found within coursebooks, exercises, movies and songs. As such, the aim to enrich

vocabulary incorporated the most diverse range of resources among all the focus areas.

One of the students applied a special method to their vocabulary learning known as 'the Goldlist method'[4]. This method could be considered an extension of the previously mentioned strategy, creating a more systematic revision of the newly acquired vocabulary. The following excerpt shows that the student discovered this method during their research on learning words more effectively: *"I wanted to learn vocabulary that I would keep in my mind for as long as possible. One method caught my attention, so I decided to try it this semester... I discovered it when watching a video lecture by Slovakian polyglot Lýdia Machová."*

Additionally, the students took advantage of applications designed for vocabulary learning and memorisation, namely Word Up, Droplets, and Quizlet. These applications provided students with interactive exercises, flashcards and quizzes to enhance, practice or broaden their vocabulary. The students frequently associated this approach with advantages such as accessibility, interactivity and availability of a variety of learning modes within the applications, allowing learners to choose the ones most suitable for them and their learning styles and preferences.

> *"I get notifications three times a day and each time it shows me a few words and I have to put them in the "I know" or "I want to learn" fields... and every day the application will generate new words... I think it's a great way to practice your vocabulary."*

> *"It is a simple app, which tests your vocabulary... For me, it is super effective because whenever I am bored, I just open the app and start learning."*

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[4] The Goldlist method is based on the principles of spaced repetition and long-term memory. The learners first write down a list of words and phrases they want to learn. After a minimum of two weeks' time, they come back to the same list to rewrite the words they had not yet memorized. The process is then repeated with the newly created list. (Language Mentoring, n.d.)

Some of the students also reported learning new vocabulary while working on their main objective, improving listening skills. Despite addressing listening as their primary focus, they expressed that they had acquired new vocabulary and phrases by the end of their personal projects. Such an occurrence could be related to the similarity of the resources used for both listening skills and vocabulary. This correlation is shown in the following excerpt extracted from the reflective work of one of the students who set an aim to enhance their listening. *"You can listen to anything anytime. You can watch films, listen to music or listen to podcasts and you will find words you didn't know and put them in a context."*

The difference between the resources used for vocabulary or listening would then lie in the ways the personal strategies were employed as well as the overall focus of the strategy in question.

For **listening**, the students utilized three main resources – movies and series, which are considered as one resource within this thesis, and then podcasts and music. Contrary to the previous aim to broaden vocabulary and, therefore, look for new words and their meaning, the focus was shifted towards understanding the spoken language in general, trying to discern what was being said and improving listening comprehension skills.

One of the students who had decided to use movies to enhance their listening employed the strategy of writing down dialogues and then replaying the same scenes with subtitles to correct their writing. Compared to that, the other strategies would be considered more passive. Some students switched the subtitles from Czech to English to pay closer attention to the English language, while others chose to watch the movies or series with no subtitles altogether without further engaging in any additional activities related to learning.

"I often do not perceive the language at all and only read the subtitles. That is why I decided to change the subtitles to English."

37

"I turned my favourite British TV show on, and for some time, I turned off the subtitles and wrote what the characters were saying. Then I replayed the scene with the subtitles on so I could check my writing."

With four students incorporating songs into their learning strategies, music was the second most common resource within the context of enhancing listening skills. The students often associated their choice with their personal interest and love for music. They reported having intentionally sought ways to include music in their learning, believing it would make the learning process more enjoyable.

"I combined learning English with something I did every day – listening to music."

"Since I am a person who loves music, I tried to find a way of practising listening and listening to music at the same time."

The main strategy revolved around actively focusing on the lyrics and their meaning while listening, which is rather similar to the approach taken by those who chose to watch movies and series. Among the four students whose goal was to enhance their listening skills through music, two of them utilized an application called Lyricstraining.[5]

"...when I listen to music I focus more on the meaning of lyrics."

"I began focusing on the lyrics more than before. After a few times of hearing the song, I would search the lyrics to fill in the gaps."

The three students who included **writing** as the area of focus for their personal projects each employed a different approach. The goal was, however, the same for all three – to write more. One of the strategies included writing into their personal diary every day. Another student combined learning with their interest in books and

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[5] The application supports active engagement with music through interactive exercises. The students select a song of their liking and are then provided with incomplete lyrics. The task is to fill in the missing words while listening to the song.

fanfictions and decided to translate stories from Czech to English and vice versa. The last strategy aimed to enhance writing skills through texting with friends. The same student who used texting also noted in their reflection that the main source of improvement in their writing skills came from taking notes at school, despite it not being one of the strategies they had chosen for themselves.

"By reading fanfictions I found new ways to describe my feelings, my opinions and other things... Thanks to that my expressing of written word is much better now ... By discovering new and new stories that I loved I decided to translate some of those in Czech"

" I was also texting with my foreign friends in English, but it was not as effective as writing notes in class... I got better at writing in English, but mostly because of school. I have every lecture in English, so I am forced to write notes completely in English."

Language learning strategies and Oxford's classification

The following section focuses on the strategies within the students' personal projects using Oxford's classification of language learning strategies[6] (LLS).

The students who identified their own needs, set a learning goal and chose strategies and approaches accordingly can be considered to have used **metacognitive LLS**. This means that it refers to all the students whose work was used for this thesis, for they all created their personal projects after determining their weaknesses and areas of shortcomings. Additionally, many of the students explored different resources, did research prior to their projects and monitored their mistakes – all of these falls under the category of metacognitive strategies. Most importantly, the students self-reflected and self-evaluated their overall learning process, demonstrating their ability to approach their learning critically and with a clear purpose in their minds.

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[6] refer to chapter 4.2.3 Learner-based approaches (pp. 18-19)

"I personally think that things I like and enjoy work for me."

"The main thing that helped me was not to rely only on school, but also learn at home by more "fun" things."

"Many people believe that learning another language is very difficult but I think it is about the way you look at it and about setting your mind to it. It doesn't have to be difficult if you find the right effective way for yourself."

"I realized that to master a foreign language, understanding it is not enough."

The fact that the students not only created but also carried out their learning projects means that they all also employed **cognitive LLS**. The students actively engaged with the language for the purpose of reaching their goal using various strategies and methods of their choosing. As such, each of the strategies mentioned in the first part of this sub-chapter could be classified as a cognitive strategy – from using learning apps and websites for learning to listening to podcasts and music to broaden vocabulary.

Affective LLS mostly appeared in the reflective works of the students who considered their emotional and psychological states to be one of the weaknesses in their language learning. The strategy in question would be determining and acknowledging their feelings, addressing possible ways to work on them and believing in the positive results. The majority of these students decided to face their feelings of fear and anxiety and slowly built their confidence through exposure to the situations they would normally try to avoid. These, however, were not the only instances of affective LLS found within the students' reflective works. Several other students addressed their attitudes towards language learning or made positive statements regarding their learning process. A clear example of an affective strategy would be the student who created a list to support their motivation to continue studying English.

...there are several different options, but the first and most crucial requirement is a positive view of things."

"I think the most important thing is to keep learning and not give up."

"I found out how important the motivation is for studying. I wrote down the reasons for learning English (For example: I want to pass my knowledge to someone else, I want to travel, etc.). Since I marked the exact reasons why I want to study English, I could better concentrate on learning."

Considering that the students' approaches often aligned with their personal interests, it is highly probable that the students chose activities that they, themselves, believed would be enjoyable for them. As such, employing an approach based on the student's emotions and motivations could be considered an affective learning strategy in itself.

All the students who actively engaged in conversations with others in the English language employed **social LLS**. It is not surprising then that the identified social strategies were found within the personal projects focused on speaking or writing. The interactions either happened in real life, face to face, or through online communication platforms.

Similarly to social strategies, **memory LLS** were found mostly within one particular area of focus – vocabulary. The strategies included writing down new words the students encountered, translating them and then reviewing the new vocabulary regularly to remember them. Although via applications, the students also used flashcards, quizzes and other means of practice in order to learn words more effectively. Applying the Goldlist method in the vocabulary learning would fall under the category of memory strategies as well, for it supported the student's ability to retain new words in their long-term memory.

As for **compensation LLS**, it was rather difficult to find any data in the reflective works that could serve as evidence of the strategies being employed in the students'

language learning. However, if we consider the definition of compensation strategies that says that learners use these to overcome the limitations or gaps in their language proficiency and knowledge, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that each student employed a form of compensation strategy in their learning process. The lack of evidence could then be attributed to students employing such strategies without them even being fully aware of it.

5.3.4   The outcomes of the personal learning projects

The major emotions that could be associated with what the students said in regard to the results of their projects would be accomplishment, satisfaction and, especially, the sense of fulfilment. Some students expressed their content with the overall outcomes, while others acknowledged that they did not achieve their desired level of improvement. Nevertheless, those students still recognized and appreciated the progress they had made.

> " *I was quite succesfull. I could use an online dictionary for homeworks, but I didn't. Instead, I trusted my own guts. I started taking risks. I created my new personal philosophy: Something is always better than nothing. And as they say, Failure is the mother of success.*"

> "*I can talk more fluently even under stress and my grammar has improved considerably.*"

> "*I actually feel progress in every way, but it is also not as good as I expected.*"

The students usually addressed not only the extent to which they had reached their goal, but also what they had realized and gained upon completing their projects. This includes, for instance, what worked best for them or what, on the other hand, was not as effective.

> "*The main thing that helped me was not to rely only on school, but also learn at home by more "fun" things,*"

"It is matter of course that I am still using coursebooks and dictionaries to improve my vocabulary, but I do not enjoy it and therefore I do not think that I am quite capable of effectively learning from these resources. I see the word but there is nothing behind it. No feelings, no hidden magic.,, I see the word, I see its meaning, but I can not feel its real meaning."

"In my opinion, I was successful, mostly because I was forced to communicate in English during my classes. Now I feel more confident while speaking English and I have better understanding of how word stress can improve how the words sound. I also noticed that my spelling has improved, probably because I started writing with other English-speaking people using an app on my phone."

Within the reflective works used for this thesis, all 24 instances where students expressed their thoughts regarding the results of their personal learning projects were either neutral or positive. No thoughts, such as failing to carry out the projects or reach the goal completely, were found in the students' reflections. Even with the students acknowledging their lower activity, it was apparent that they were also aware that they still gained something from the learning process.

"I have not been very consistent, but the results are evident, though I still need a lot of practice."

"...while I will admit I did not focus on it as much as I should have, but I'm getting more and more aware of it."

Although less often, some of the statements could be used directly as evidence that the impact of the personal projects extended beyond just improving language proficiency. Allowing the students to take charge of their own learning also positively influenced the students' motivation, self-confidence and, possibly, their attitudes towards language learning in general. Such instances could be regarded as desirable outcomes that educators may aim for by implementing these language learning projects into the curriculum.

"I do not think it changed my English level, but I feel more confident speaking and writing."

"I did not manage to meet all the goals I set, but I found that I had the motivation to continue my development."

"I think I see some progress and cannot wait for more."

"I'll need to put everything I've got into it, if I want to succeed."

"Future possibilities excite me, I have big ambitions, and I want to learn more English."

6   Discussion

The theoretical part of this bachelor thesis presents a comprehensive introduction and overview of autonomy in language learning. It opens by defining lifelong learning, a concept of continuous learning and personal development throughout one's life, closely interconnected to the notion of autonomy. The rest of the theoretical part is then dedicated to defining and characterising autonomy in order to provide a closer understanding of this concept.

The aim of the empirical part was to examine the notion of autonomous English language learning and explore the presence of autonomy and autonomous behaviour within the selected students' language learning. This was done by analysing the students' reflective works written in their first year of university. The following section will summarise the findings from the analysis and discuss further insights in relation to the signs of autonomy.

Talking about the presence of autonomy within the students' learning also means addressing some aspects that played a role in the students' decision to create and carry out their personal projects. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the reflective works and personal projects were all part of one of the courses the students took in their first year of study. Setting aside the students' personal factors, such as their motivation, determination or learning attitudes, the study course itself could be considered an element associated with fostering autonomy. The study course aligns with the principles of the curriculum-based approaches, specifically the process syllabus[7]. The teacher gave clear conditions that had to be met and let the students become the major decision-makers in their own learning. The conditions did not restrict the students' actions in any way. Instead, they served as a guide and supported the development of autonomous behaviour.

The students were first tasked with identifying the areas they considered as their shortcomings or weaknesses. In relation to the concept of autonomy in language

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[7] refer to chapter 4.2.5 Curriculum-based approaches

learning, this is one of the fundamental skills, for it allows the learner to direct their focus towards areas that require it the most. The areas that seemed to pose the greatest challenges to the students were grammar and speaking, each being addressed as shortcomings 12 times. Followed by vocabulary came affective factors, which predominantly revolved around emotional and psychological states. Students frequently associated these states to their speaking skills, demonstrating that a complex interplay of various factors influences one's language proficiency. Similarly, the connection was made between speaking and vocabulary.

It is hardly surprising that none of the students chose to focus on the aspects beyond their subjectively perceived weaknesses when determining their personal learning aim. Generally, they set a goal to improve the area they identified as their shortcoming. Very occasionally, the aim was more specific and directed towards engaging in activities within these problematic areas.

By giving the students the freedom to choose how they want to learn and reach their personal goals, the students could employ a range of strategies and methods that fit their own learning styles and preferences. Generally, they were more likely to choose resources that aligned with their interests and hobbies. They intentionally sought ways to combine learning with something they personally enjoy, such as playing video games, reading books or listening to music. The students frequently chose activities from their everyday lives and modified them to fit their learning aims. This was done, for instance, by directing their attention to specific areas they wanted to focus on or by increasing their overall activity for the purpose of maximising their practice.

Many of the students' strategies would most likely not occur within the traditional classroom settings. The traditional classrooms, as we have them now, are commonly constrained by their structure, which limits the learners' inherent ability to take charge of their own learning. Suppose there is not yet a way to effectively incorporate a broader range of activities within classroom settings. In that case, the goal should be to ensure that learners know how to utilise their innate

abilities and skills outside the classroom. By raising their awareness and providing them with the necessary set of skills, knowledge and experiences it is possible to create an environment where the learning process does not end with setting foot outside the school premises. For this reason, autonomy belongs to one of the essential concepts in our society and education,

From how the students self-evaluated their learning process and addressed the outcomes, it is rather apparent that the learning projects were a positive experience for all of them. The projects not only enhanced their language proficiency but also positively influenced other areas, such as the students' motivation and self-confidence.

The findings from the analysis could then be further summarised into the following two statements:

- The students demonstrated their ability to take charge of their own learning.
- Offering learners opportunities and experiences that foster autonomy and autonomous behaviour is not meaningless.

Despite all the positive results, it is important also to address the possibility of the 'mask of autonomy'[8] taking place. The students may have been affected by various factors while writing their reflective works. They could have felt the pressure to meet the course requirements, the teacher's expectations or even their own. Therefore, it is not completely unlikely that some personal learning projects were not carried out the way the students described. A possible solution to this uncertainty for similar future studies could be to have the students, whose work would be used for the purpose of the study, fill out a questionnaire in which the 'truthfulness' of the reflections would be addressed. The fact that the questionnaire would be anonymous and the data collected by another fellow student and not a teacher could take off the students' need to provide replies that they consider as desired but, in essence, are not truthful. In the case of this specific thesis, in which

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[8] refer to chapter 4.4 Measuring autonomy – is it possible?

the sole source of information is the reflective works, there is no other option than to believe in their authenticity.

7   Conclusion

The main aim of the presented bachelor thesis was to explore the notion of autonomy in language learning. The theoretical part served as the introduction to the concept of autonomy with a further focus on this concept within the context of language learning. The related terms were addressed and defined to provide a better understanding and insight into the notion of autonomy and autonomous learning.

The empirical part presented an analysis of student reflective works in relation to the concept of autonomy. The reflections were written by students of the English language at the Faculty of Education, University of South Bohemia. The analysis first focused on identifying the areas the students subjectively considered as their weaknesses in their language learning, followed by looking into the individual projects the students devised to address the shortcomings in question. A separate sub-chapter was dedicated to the strategies and methods employed within the projects. The students' thoughts regarding the outcomes were then included at the end of the empirical part.

The analysis yielded results that could be associated with Holec's definition of autonomy and other elements related to concept that were addressed in the theoretical part. As such, the analysis showed the presence of autonomy in the language learning of the students whose work was used for the thesis. The significance of supporting autonomy was also highlighted within the thesis.

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Abbreviations

LLS … Language learning strategies

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Table of obtainable information from the student works

Appendix 1   Table of obtainable information from the student works

	Strengths	Weaknesses/ shortcomings	Strategies/ methods – general	Project strategies	Personal learning aim	Learning projects results
1			✓		✓	✓
2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	✓	✓	✓			
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6		✓	✓		✓	✓
7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	✓	✓	✓			
9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12		✓	✓	✓		
13	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
14	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	✓	✓	✓			✓
19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	✓	✓	✓			
21	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
22	✓	✓	✓		✓	
23	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	✓	✓	✓			
25	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	✓	✓			✓	
27	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
28	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
30			✓			✓
31	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
33	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
34	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
35	✓	✓	✓			✓
	30	33	34	17	24	24