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СОДРЖИНА / TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 11** ПРЕДГОВОР
Проф. д-р Виолета Димова, прв декан на Филолошкиот факултет во Штип
FOREWORD
Prof. Violeta Dimova, the first Dean of the Faculty of Philology in Stip

ЈАЗИК / LANGUAGE

- 15** **Marija Kusevska**
DESCRIBING SPEECH ACTS FROM CROSS-CULTURAL
AND INTERLANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE
- 27** **Costanza Geddes da Filicaia**
“TIRINNANZI” O “TYRYNNANZY”? IL *GIORNALINO DI GIAN
BURRASCA* E LA GRAFFIANTE IRONIA ONOMASTICA DI LUIGI
BERTELLI
Costanza Geddes da Filicaia
“TIRINNANZI” OR “TYRYNNANZY”? THE *GIORNALINO DI GIAN
BURRASCA* AND LUIGI BERTELLI’S MORDANT IRONY ON NAMES
- 37** **Paolo Orrù**
STRATEGIE DISCORATIVE DELL’INFORMAZIONE TELEVISIVA NEL
DISCORSO SULLE MIGRAZIONI, ALCUNI APPUNTI LINGUISTICI
SUL CASO ITALIANO
Paolo Orrù
DISCOURSIIVE STRATEGIES OF THE TV INFORMATION IN THE
DISCOURSE ABOUT MIGRATIONS, SOME LINGUISTIC POINTS
REGARDING THE ITALIAN CASE
- 53** **Марија Гркова**
ОСВРТ КОН УСВОЈУВАЊЕТО НА ГРАМАТИЧКИТЕ КАТЕГОРИИ
КАЈ ИМЕНКИТЕ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК КАКО СТРАНСКИ
Marija Grkova
REVIEW OF THE ACQUISITION OF THE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES
OF NOUNS IN MACEDONIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

КНИЖЕВНОСТ / LITERATURE

- 67** **Марија Ѓорѓиева-Димова**
ИНТЕРПРЕТАТИВНИ ОСЦИЛАЦИИ МЕЃУ ТЕКСТОТ И КОНТЕКСТОТ
Marija Gjorgjieva Dimova
INTERPRETATIVE OSCILLATIONS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

- 81 Весна Мојсова-Чепишевска**
 КУЛТУРНАТА ДРУГОСТ НИЗ „ТЕЧНИОТ ГОВОР“ НА ПОЕТСКИОТ
 ЗБОР И ФОТОГРАФИЈАТА
 Vesna Mojsova Chepishevskа
 THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE THROUGH “THE FLUENT SPEECH” OF
 THE POETIC WORD AND PHOTOGRAPHY
- 93 Ивица Максимовски**
 СЕМАНТИКАТА И СИМБОЛИКАТА
 ВО „ЛОША ТЕТКА И ДРУГИ РАСКАЗИ“ ОД КОВИЛОСКИ
 Ivica Maksimovski
 SEMANTICS AND SYMBOLISM
 IN “BAD AUNT AND OTHER SHORT STORIES” BY KOVILOSKI
- 101 Nazlı Rânâ Gürel**
 NECİP FAZIL KISAKÜREK’İN BİR ADAM YARATMA
 ADLI PİYESİNDE ELEŞTİREL YAKLAŞIMLAR
 Nazlı Rana Gurel
 CRITICAL APPROACH FOR ‘TO CREATE A MAN’ BY NECİP FAZIL
- 109 Ivona Stojanovska**
 BAHRÎ VE DİVANI
 Ivona Stojanovska
 BAHRI AND HIS DIVAN
- 119 Славчо Ковилоски**
 ЗАПИСИТЕ НА КУЗМАН ШАПКАРЕВ ЗА МАШКО-ЖЕНСКИТЕ
 ОДНОСИ И МАКЕДОНСКОТО ОБИЧАЈНО ПРАВО
 Slavcho Koviloski
 KUZMAN SHAPKAREV’S RECORDS OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS
 AND MACEDONIAN CUSTOMARY LAW
- 127 Луси Караниколова-Чочоровска**
 СУДБИНСКАТА ЕНЕРГИЈА НА ПОЕТСКАТА РЕЧ (ЗА ПОЕТСКАТА
 СУДБИНА НА ГАНЕ ТОДОРОВСКИ, АТАНАС ВАНГЕЛОВ И ТОДОР
 ЧАЛОВСКИ)
 Lusi Karanikolova-Chochorovska
 THE DESTINAL ENERGY OF THE POETIC WORD (FOR THE POETIC
 DESTINY OF GANE TODOROVSKI, ATANAS VANGELOV AND TODOR
 CHALOVSKI)
- 135 Miruna Craciunescu**
 RÉACTIVATION D’UN IMAGINAIRE DU XVIII^E SIÈCLE DANS LES
ILLUSIONS PERDUES D’HONORÉ DE BALZAC
 Miruna Craciunescu
 IN SEARCH OF A COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY OF THE 18TH CENTURY IN
 BALZAC’S *LOST ILLUSIONS*

149 Eva Gjorgjievska
MARCEL PROUST ET LES PERSONNAGES JUIFS DANS *ALA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU*
Eva Gjorgjievska
MARCEL PROUST AND THE CHARACTERS OF JEWS IN THE NOVEL *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

161 Искра Тасевска Хаџи-Бошкова
БИОГРАФИЈАТА НА КУЗМАН ШАПКАРЕВ ВО СВЕТЛИНАТА НА БИОГРАФСКИТЕ ДИСКУРСИ
Iskra Tasevska Hadji Boshkova
KUZMAN SHAPKAREV'S BIOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF BIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSES

КУЛТУРА / CULTURE

173 Diego Poli
MATTHEW RICCI - LI MADOU: A DIALOGUE ACROSS CULTURES

185 Петар Намичев, Екатерина Намичева
ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЈА НА КУЛТУРНАТА МЕМОРИЈА ПРЕКУ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНАТА АРХИТЕКТУРА ВО МАКЕДОНИЈА
Petar Namicev, Ekaterina Namiceva
THE TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN MACEDONIA

199 Стојанче Костов
ВЛИЈАНИЕТО НА ШКОЛАТА НА ИГОР АЛЕКСАНДРОВИЧ МОЈСЕЕВ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ ФОЛКЛОРНИ АНСАМБЛИ
Stojance Kostov
THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL OF IGOR ALEXANDROVICH MOJSEYEV IN THE MACEDONIAN FOLK DANCE ENSEMBLE

207 Јане Јованов, Катерина Ромашевска
АЗБУКА НА ЧЕШКИТЕ РЕАЛИИ
Jane Jovanov, Katerina Romashevaska
ALPHABET OF CZECH REALITIES

МЕТОДИКА НА НАСТАВАТА / TEACHING METHODOLOGY

213 Igor Rižnar
BLENDED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FLIPBOARD IN HIGHER EDUCATION

225 Mahmut Çelik, Ümit Süleymani
MAKEDONYA'DA 'TÜRK YAZI DİLİ TARİHİ' KONUSUNU ÜNİVERSİTE TÜRK DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI BÖLÜMLERİNDE "ROL OYNAMA (DRAMATİZASYON) YÖNTEMİYLE ÖĞRETİMİ"

Mahmut Çelik, Ümit Süleymani
THE HISTORY OF TURKISH WRITTEN LANGUAGE TAUGHT AT
UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF TURKISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
IN MACEDONIA WITH ROLEPLAYING (DRAMATIZATION) METHOD

237 Fausto Maria Greco
UN PERCORSO DIDATTICO DI INTERCULTURALITÀ ATTRAVERSO LA
NARRATIVA DI FABIO GEDA
Fausto Maria Greco
A DIDACTIC ITINERARY TOWARDS INTERCULTURALITY THROUGH
THE NARRATIVE OF FABIO GEDA

251 Snezana Petrova, Sevda Lazarevska
L'IDENTITE CULTURELLE ET LES APPROCHES ET PRATIQUES
INTERCULTURELLES DANS L'EDUCATION
Snezana Petrova, Sevda Lazarevska
CULTURAL IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES IN
EDUCATION

259 Brikena Xhaferi, Gezim Xhaferi
THE ROLE OF CALL IN FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY – A STUDY
CONDUCTED AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY IN TETOVO

ПРИКАЗИ / BOOK REVIEWS

269 François Schmitt
COMPTE-RENDU : «FANTASTIKA (NIELEN) V TALIANESKEJ LITERATURE»
(« LE FANTASTIQUE DANS LA LITTÉRATURE ITALIENNE ET AILLEURS),
PAR EVA MESAROVA
François Schmitt
REVIEW: » «FANTASTIKA (NIELEN) V TALIANESKEJ LITERATURE»
(FANTASTIC IN ITALIAN LITERATURE AND ELSEWHERE), BY EVA
MESAROVÁ

ДОДАТОК / APPENDIX

275 ПОВИК ЗА ОБЈАВУВАЊЕ ТРУДОВИ
ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“
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Brikena Xhaferi
Gezim Xhaferi

THE ROLE OF CALL IN FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY – A STUDY CONDUCTED AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY IN TETOVO

Abstract: In the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, as the theory and practice of language teaching enters a new century, the importance of helping students to be more autonomous is becoming a major concern of many teachers and educators. There are several tools that can promote learner autonomy, and computer assisted language learning (CALL) is one of them. Many studies have shown that computers have positive effect on increasing students' interest in learning and make them stay longer on the tasks given by the teacher. Similarly, Littlemore (2001) stated that new technologies, e.g. computers, the Internet, multimedia, language laboratories and video can help develop learner autonomy. Also, computer technology can provide the students with the means to control their own learning, to construct meaning and to evaluate and monitor their own performance (Smith, 2004). The present study aims to investigate students' attitudes towards the use of CALL in their learning, its impact on promoting learner autonomy and the teachers' role in this process. The study uses three instruments: student questionnaire, teacher interview and learner diary. The study results based on learner diaries and students' questionnaire responses showed that CALL has the potential to increase learner autonomy because students are able to direct their own learning, take control over their learning, assess their learning, feel more responsible in selecting online-materials, and the motivation is higher than in regular classes. Teachers' interviews showed that teachers perceive their role as a facilitator, guide and counselor in promoting learner autonomy.

Keywords: *learner autonomy, university, CALL, teacher role, student attitudes.*

Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy (LA) has been central to the Council of Europe's thinking about the effectiveness of language teaching and learning since 1979. The concept of learner autonomy was first introduced by Henry Holec (1981) when he wrote the book *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. There are many definitions of learner autonomy. According to Holec (1981, p. 3), "Learner autonomy means the ability to take charge of one's own learning", while Dickinson said that "Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11) and Little believes that "Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning" (Little, 1991, p. 4).

Generally, there are three reasons to promote LA: firstly, learners have the right to be free to choose how they will learn (philosophical view); secondly, teachers should help their students how to take responsibility for their own learning and prepare them for their future. Learning is more effective when it is learner-centered (pedagogical view); Thirdly, learners are more motivated when they are involved in decision-making process (practical view) (Cotterall, 1995).

Regarding the teacher's role in this process, it is the role of a manager of resources in the lifelong learning; s/he is also a facilitator who helps learners plan and carry out their own learning in terms of setting objectives, selecting materials, evaluating their learning, etc. The teacher can act as a counselor, when he/she gives advice so that they can learn better. It is important to emphasize that teachers should enhance learner autonomy in their students and teach strategies to learn language autonomously.

The learner, on the other hand, is supposed to take responsibility for his/her own learning. "Learner autonomy is based on the idea that if students are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning" (Littlejohn, 1985, cited in Balçıkanlı, 2010, p. 90).

CALL and learner autonomy

New technologies, such as computers, the Internet, multimedia, language laboratories and video can help develop learner autonomy (Littlemore, 2001). Computer technology can provide the students with the means to control their own learning, to construct meaning and to evaluate and monitor their own performance (Smith, 2004). Computers will modify the nature of learning by substituting the control of learning more in the hands of the learner. In other words it is more learner-centered (Bruce, 1993).

Warschauer & Healey (1998, cited in Gündüz, 2005, p. 202) state that "computers offer a very useful and encouraging medium, for both integrated skills such as Reading Skills, Writing Skills, Speaking Skills, and Listening Skills". Similarly, Kataoka (2000, p.2) states that "second language learners feel more comfortable when speaking to computers rather than in face-to face situations". He further argues that students do not care a lot about the errors they can make, and feel more relaxed practicing pronunciation without embarrassment, even if they make mistakes. Finally, Hoven (1999, p.1) proclaims that "computers allow second language learners to decide the way and the pace that suits them and their needs".

South East European University in Tetovo, the context where the study is conducted, is a modern University which provides students with the following technology equipments: computer labs, 24 hours internet, learning platform LIBRI, electronic evidence in the classroom, online journals and video conferences. Taking into consideration these opportunities that are offered here, the teachers use technology in their teaching. Different methods such as self-access centers, online evaluation and LIBRI are very good methods to develop

the level of learner autonomy students possess when they come into the University for the first time. Nevertheless, if the teacher is not acquainted with the range of learning opportunities that CALL offers it will not have positive effects (Jones, 2001). Furthermore, “the acquisition of this knowledge should include specific training in what I would term “CALL pedagogy”, that is, the exploitation of those opportunities for the benefits of the learners” (Jones, 2001, para. 9).

Recent studies

There are several studies conducted in this field, and all of these studies have investigated the development of learner autonomy at different institutions and from different perspectives. One of the most relevant studies for the present one was conducted by Xhaferi, Waldispühl, Eriksson, and Xhaferi in 2014. The study investigated teachers’ and students’ beliefs about Learner Autonomy (LA) and practices in language learning. The study involved students and teachers of two institutions, SEEE and University of Education in Zug, Switzerland. The results showed that both teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. The psychological concept of LA, such as monitoring and reflecting on one’s learning, is perceived to be the most important one and learner autonomy does not mean learning without a teacher.

Another study was conducted by Arikan and Bakla in 2011. They carried out a study on a group of Turkish university students and discovered that experience with blogging contributed to developing their autonomy. Finally, Jarvis in 2012 observed in his study that the application of technology impacted considerably the participants’ autonomous learning in self-study centers. They noted, however, that some features of informal learning incorporated in the project helped achieve this aim. Additionally, Benson (2001) emphasizes that technology has the potential to foster autonomous behavior in learners because it facilitates self-access in learning which gives learners many valuable opportunities to self-direct their learning and take control over it. Using technology-based materials gives students more responsibility for learning and can enhance their intrinsic motivation (Darasawang & Reinders, 2010, cited in Rahimi and Farivar, 2014, p. 645).

Research methodology

The main aim of this study was to investigate the students’ perceptions of learner autonomy and CALL. Additionally, it investigates the teacher’s role and skills in this process. The research questions are:

- What are the students’ attitudes towards the use of CALL in their learning?
- Does the use of CALL have any effect on promoting learner autonomy in English language learning?
- What is the perceived teacher role and skills in developing autonomous learners?

Study instruments

The instruments include a student questionnaire, a teacher interview and a learner diary. The student questionnaire consisted of 20 items. It was modified from Borg and Al Bushaidi's Questionnaire (2012). The participants had to tick one answer which applied to them using the Likert scale. The teacher interview consisted of ten questions (composed on the basis of literature review) and was conducted with eight EFL teachers. All interviews were done individually. The third instrument was a learner diary. The learner diary was used to identify students' thoughts on CALL and its importance in promoting LA as well as their learning difficulties. All of these methods provided enough data to answer the research questions.

Study participants

Participants of the study were 60 students at the Department of English Language and Literature at SEEU. They were of both genders, males and females, and different nationalities: Albanians, Macedonians and Turks. Their age ranged from 19-21 years. They all had different educational background because they came from different countries, Kosova, Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Turkey, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, etc.

Results of the study

The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate students' knowledge and understanding of learner autonomy and the effects that CALL might have in developing it. Table 1 shows the questionnaire results.

<i>ITEMS</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. I am informed about the concept of Learner autonomy	9%	20%	13%	30%	29%
2. Online activities can enhance LA	7%	3%	8%	19%	63%
3. LA is also promoted through regular opportunities to complete tasks alone	18%	22%	21%	9%	30%
4. LA is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed	8%	11%	12%	12%	57%
5. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre.	22%	15%	8%	20%	35%
6. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy	35%	13%	12%	20%	20%
7. Computer literacy is very important in promoting LA through CALL	5%	5%	22%	34%	34%
8. Learner motivation is higher when learning with computers	15%	15%	10%	27%	53%
9. Computer varieties help in developing LA	11%	13%	9%	24%	45%
10. LA does not mean learning without a teacher	6%	14%	6%	20%	44%

11. The teacher plays an important role in supporting learner autonomy	20%	5%	15%	27%	23%
12. LA has a positive effect on success as a learner	25%	13%	12%	10%	50%
13. Teacher's proficiency of using computers is important in promoting LA	28%	18%	10%	22%	22%
14. Digital books are very useful for individual learning.	20%	21%	15%	16%	28%
15. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy	37%	17%	11%	25%	10%
16. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials	12%	16%	9%	23%	40%
17. Computers offer freedom when learning	11%	18%	12%	28%	28%
18. CALL promotes LA because learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do	16%	18%	11%	14%	41%
19. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.	17%	19%	14%	18%	32%
20. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners	24%	16%	9%	20%	31%

Table 1: Learner Autonomy questionnaire (SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly disagree)

Interview results

The second research method was the interview, which was used to identify teacher's role and responsibilities in promoting LA through CALL. Eight EFL teachers were interviewed. The following are some important responses.

(R=Researcher, P=Participant)

R: What is the teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy using CALL?

P3: I generally think that the teacher's role is very important in promoting learner autonomy especially through the use of technology. There are many possibilities that technology offers nowadays therefore, we should encourage our student to become independent learners.

P5: I think that the teacher should always facilitate student learning especially in using CALL, let the students select the activities related to a certain course topic.

P8: I see myself as a guide in this process.

R: To what extent can CALL contribute in fostering Learner Autonomy in the context where you teach?

P2: SEEU is a modern University, therefore, the technology is available and the students should be encouraged to work independently. Then, teachers should use different methods which promote LA.

P5: CALL can contribute a lot in fostering LA at our Institution. The students can study without a teacher while working on their seminar papers, classroom presentations, etc.

The results show that teachers believe that their role is very important in promoting learner autonomy.

Learner diary

A Learner Diary was the third instrument that we used. Diaries are very useful because students can reflect on their learning, identify learning difficulties and suggest possible solutions. There were 15 student involved in this phase of the research. The following are some excerpts taken from the students' diaries.

S1: When I learn English, I try to do many things. I think that computer is an important way of learning because you can find many things there, most importantly you can learn by yourself.

S2: I prefer to study alone not with the others therefore, I use my PC a lot, it helps me concentrate on the tasks, there is no time pressure and I can search different materials. The teacher can help only as a facilitator.

S3: Even though I prefer to study alone, I still need my teacher to explain many things to me. I believe that teacher input is very important. When I practice at home I use my computer because it offers interesting activities.

S4: I am very motivated to study on my computer because there are many online materials and there is also the feedback on the correct answers given.

Conclusion

Based on the overall study results, it is obvious that the majority of the participants have a positive attitude towards CALL because it has the potential to increase learner autonomy. Majority of the participants (63%) believe that Online activities can enhance LA. According to the participants, they are more motivated to study through CALL (53%) and the varieties that computers offer help them in developing LA (45%). Similarly, Benson (2001) emphasizes that technology has the potential to foster autonomous behavior in learners because it facilitates self-access in learning, and gives learners many valuable opportunities to self-direct their learning and take control over it.

CALL can also have positive effect on promoting LA in learning English because the students can direct their own learning, select their learning materials and they are more motivated when they learn in CALL environment.

According to them, LA is also promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do (41%). CALL also helps learners with interpersonal learning style and they do many activities at home.

Finally, based on teacher interview results, it can be seen that the teachers see their role as a facilitator, guide and a counselor in promoting learner autonomy. Both groups of participants, teachers and students, believe that teachers have a very important role in guiding students through this process.

To conclude, promoting learner autonomy using CALL is a complex process especially in an environment such as South East European University because many changes are needed to shift from traditional, teacher – centered to contemporary teaching. This is also difficult for students, because they need some initial training to become more independent learners and use CALL in their own learning. Therefore, teacher’s support is highly demanding to develop students’ awareness, to identify learners’ needs in terms of strategy use, and to adopt different ones that will help them become autonomous learners and remove many barriers that exist in education. This study can serve as a starting point for further discussions on learner autonomy.

Recommendations

Recommendations for teachers – Since the teachers’ role is very important in promoting LA, they should consider attending seminars or training sessions on learner autonomy and the use of CALL more efficiently. The trainings can include both teachers and students.

Recommendations for pedagogy – Teachers should consider how to design a lesson that gradually develops learner autonomy in a real class. Learning through CALL should be included in every course. Beyond the classroom context, the cultural aspects of learner autonomy should also be taken into account.

For further research- Future studies need to focus on gender differences and the level of learner autonomy student possess. Also, research should focus on all levels of education because learner autonomy is a long and difficult process.

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