

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (BUSINESS ENGLISH) AS POWERFUL PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC UNIVERSITY

Olga Bratanych

Associate Professor, PhD, Kryvyi Rih Economic Institute of Kyiv National Economic
University named after Vadym Hetman,
e-mail: lecturer@i.ua, orcid.org/0000-0003-0141-9850, Ukraine

Sergii Skydan

Prof., DSc, Kryvyi Rih Economic Institute of Kyiv National Economic University named
after Vadym Hetman,
e-mail: kaf_language@kneu.dp.ua, orcid.org/0000-0002-9478-5341, Ukraine

Melisandra Leonardos

Master of Arts in Teaching, Volunteer of Peace Corpse of the USA in Ukraine, Kryvyi Rih
Economic Institute of Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman,
e-mail: melisandraleonardos@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-8033-3117, USA

Abstract. The authors have analyzed the conceptual framework of self-directed learning theory; described some issues of self-directed learning within the field of higher education in the North America and identified some challenges of self-directed English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning in the Ukrainian Economic University setting; shared some practical information about using it as a pedagogical tool in an ESP (Business English) classroom for advanced learners in the context of Ukrainian Economic University; characterized the ESP course containing a self-directed learning component; showed who is more likely to become an efficient self-directed ESP learner; presented some ideas on the role of the teacher in involving students in self-directed ESP learning; selected several ways to foster an ESP learner autonomy; established a number of economic benefits of self-directed ESP learning.

Keywords: self - directed learning (SDL), English for specific purposes (ESP), students, University.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.23856/2512>

Introduction

For many decades, theorists and practitioners of the methodology of teaching foreign languages have been searching for approaches that would satisfy the various preferences and needs of students, match their individual aptitudes and learning styles, stimulate their cognitive activity, and ultimately improve learning outcomes. Such approaches include individualization, differentiation, and personalization of learning environment, as well as the organization of independent work, which led to self-directed learning as the highest form of individualized learning. The idea of autonomy in language learning emerged in the 1960's although it was not fully implemented in the practice of teaching foreign languages either in the secondary or higher school. However, in recent years, the situation has begun to change. Technological developments in educational publishing lead to the production of the wealth of self-instructional materials and multimedia packages. Development of communicative teaching philosophy, which shifted focus from teachers to learners, gave impetus to the

research in the field of self-directed learning as part of adult education. However, the problem of organizing a self-directed foreign language learning (SDFLL) in general, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in particular, in the context of University education, especially with regard to its practical application, has not yet found its final solution. In conditions of economic crisis, the modern system of foreign language education in Ukrainian higher school requires not only effective but also flexible, economically sound approaches to teaching foreign languages. That's why the relationship between English for Specific Purposes learning (ESP) and self-directed learning as a key component of advanced foreign language learning in Economic Universities is a topic worth exploring on both theoretical and practical grounds because this match might meet those requirements.

The purpose of this paper is to address some prevailing ideas concerning the importance, applicability and implications of self-directed language learning usage in a foreign language classroom and to share some practical information about using it as a pedagogical tool in an ESP (Business English) classroom for advanced learners in the context of the Ukrainian Economic University.

Conceptual Framework of Self-directed Learning Theory. Literature Review

A large part of the research that has been done for self-directed learning was compiled by foreign researchers.

S. Brookfield (*Brookfield, 1980*) suggested six principles of effective practice in facilitating learning: (1) voluntary participation in learning; (2) mutual respect; (3) collaborative spirit; (4) action and reflection; (5) critical reflection; and (6) self-direction. The latter principle is most closely associated with self-directed learning.

Cambridge Business English Dictionary defines "self-directed" as follows "making your own decisions and organizing your own work rather than being told what to do by managers, teachers, etc."

M.S. Knowles (*Knowles, 1975: 18*) describes self-directed learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."

According to Malcom Knowles (*Knowles, 1975*), the underlying reasoning behind self-directed learning is 'survival'. In his opinion, the necessity to depend on oneself has become a requirement to live in today's busy world.

Knowles (*Knowles, 1975:14-15*) identifies three reasons for self-directed learning as follows:

- Individuals, who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers possibly waiting to be taught.
- Self-directed learning is more in tune with our natural processes of psychological development.
- Many of the new developments in education put a heavy responsibility on the learners to take a good deal of initiative in their own learning.

Geri Manning (*Manning, 2007*) describes the notion of self-directed learning as a part of adult education “**When** an individual or group decides that they want to learn certain information, knowledge or skill, they often seek the help of a teacher or professional instructor to tell them how to proceed and to supervise the learning process. However, another alternative for an individual is to assume the primary responsibility for planning, initiating, and conducting the learning project. Such behavior can be called self-instruction, self-education, independent study, individual study, self-teaching or self-directed learning”.

Self-directed learning means a person:

- is able to choose what to learn;
- knows how to learn it;
- is able to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in practice.

Self-Directed Learning within the Field of Higher Education in the North America

Within the field of higher education in the North America, self-directed learning is often regarded with ambivalence. A study by Susan Wilcox shed light on this topic with her study on attitudes towards self-directed learning in higher education instructors in Canada. The majority of instructors in the study expressed concerns about the quality of self-directed learning: “Self-directed learning is likely to be encouraged only if it is seen to facilitate excellence in academic achievement and professional training. It is not likely to be encouraged if it is seen to compromise standards” (*Wilcox, 1996: 174*). Further, they also raised the issue of who is best qualified to determine what constitutes valid and appropriate knowledge:

“Self-directed learning raises questions about who has authority to define what is to be learned and how it is to be learned in the University. When learners are asked to consider what is worth knowing, and invited to participate in decisions about the design and assessment of learning experiences, Pandora's box is opened” (*Wilcox, 1996, p. 173*).

Among the instructors in the study who do support self-directed learning it was found that they were highly committed to the role of teacher in their professional lives and suggested that self-directed learning is a desirable goal, albeit, one that is not necessarily easy to achieve. Moreover, they described their teaching approach as being learner centered (*Wilcox, 1996*). This might lead one to surmise that instructors who place an emphasis on teaching, and learner-centered teaching in particular, are more likely to support and employ self-directed learning in their classrooms.

In many respects, self-directed learning in North American higher education is expressed much more frequently through the idea of open curriculum at an institution than it is specific pedagogy in the classroom. There are many “non-traditional” institutions that offer open curriculum, some of which are quite prestigious. For example, Brown University, in Rhode Island is an Ivy League institution. At Brown, undergraduate students are responsible for designing their own individualized programs of study across several different disciplines. The philosophy behind open curriculum is not so different from that of self-directed learning in the classroom. Students get the freedom to choose for themselves what they want to study and how they want to apply this knowledge to the wider world.

Self-directed learning is very much encouraged at these institutions and many of them do not grade students in the typical A-F format. Rather, students are given written course evaluations from their instructors that summarize the students’ performance based on goals

established by the students themselves. This is done to encourage students to engage with course material for the sake of intellectual curiosity rather than the attainment of grades and a high grade point average.

For all of that, however, most of the courses at these institutions are still delivered in the traditional format that places the focus on the teacher, not the students. Self-directed learning might be encouraged in the classroom and applied in the curriculum; however, it still takes place amidst the backdrop of the more traditional teacher-centered pedagogy.

Challenges of Self-Directed ESP Learning in the Ukrainian Economic University Setting

The geography of self-directed learning is constantly expanding: Germany, Denmark, Eastern Europe, China, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, and Tanzania. For example, in the Japanese higher school there are special centers for the organization of self-directed training and the position of educational advisors. Kanda University of international studies in Japan established the SALC (the self-access learning center) that provides materials, learning spaces, advising services, a curriculum for promoting self-directed learning skills, and access to a community of language users. SALC use is optional, but it receives an average of 600 visitors per day. The University offers a one-credit elective course that introduces first-year students to self-directed language learning (SDLL) for their English language learning. In addition to being introduced systematically to self-directed learning strategies, students also receive support as they develop and implement their own plans from LAs and peers. Neil Curry, Jo Mynard, Junko Noguchi, and Satoko Watkins evaluated a self-directed language learning course at that University and taking into consideration positive results of their evaluation, acknowledged “that having students participate in one relatively short elective course focusing on SDLL has limitations” and suggested “that SDLL skills be integrated into mainstream University language classrooms in a more systematic way” (Curry, 2017: 31).

Self-directed learning of a foreign language for special purposes (SDL ESP) is currently a very important and urgent problem for Ukrainian students of non-linguistic higher educational institutions. The difficult economic conditions in the country and a decrease in budgets places in Economics Universities in a difficult situation. On the one hand, they must charge their students higher tuition and fees, on the other hand, they must address the aspirations of young people for economic independence from their parents and personal material well-being, and students’ potential failure, due to lack of experience, to properly set priorities. Some of the students of daytime education begin to work and switch to an individual schedule of studying certain disciplines, including ESP courses. Individual training schedules involve periodic individual consultations with the teacher who should direct, correct and control the independent work on the subject. However, given these economic conditions and lack of funds in some universities, the hours of ongoing consultations and individual work with students are removed from the teaching load of ESP teachers, as well as some other FL teacher.

At the same time, the requirements for the level of foreign language proficiency of students of non-linguistic universities on the part of society, employers, governing bodies of higher education in the context of Ukraine’s integration into the EU, the processes of globalization of the economy and other spheres of life are constantly growing. For example, in the near future, the governing bodies of higher education are going to introduce the External Independent Assessment of ESP proficiency for admission to the magistracy.

There is a contradiction between the rapid development of technology, the expansion of opportunities for independent learning and the outdated perception of the educational process and the University teacher as the only source of knowledge which results, as well as in North America, in teacher –centered pedagogy. The profession of the University teacher, in the current sense of the word, may soon disappear in the same way such professions as a prompter in the theatre, and the pianist in the movie theatre have disappeared.

In the curriculum of Ukrainian Universities there is a tendency to reduce students' classroom workload and increase the share of self-work, including in ESP, and rightly so. But what to do with this self-work, how to organize it, how to motivate students to implement it, how to monitor and evaluate it?

A few decades ago it was believed that self-directed foreign language learning was not possible due to very limited contact with foreign countries and native speakers, the lack of authentic textbooks with audio and video support and the Internet. But times have changed, therefore, the conceptual approaches to understanding the role of subjects of learning process, the form of its organization and the course of learning process, assessment of academic achievements of University students, etc. should change too.

Given the number of hours allocated to the self-work of a student in Ukrainian universities, in order for it to really be realized and not only limited to independent memorization of vocational-oriented vocabulary, oral conversational topics, translation of texts, doing exercises, the hours for individual work with students and their ongoing counseling should not be removed from the ESP faculty teaching load, but rather they should be increased significantly.

There are several reasons for undertaking in-depth SD ESPL for the students of Ukrainian Economic University:

- self-identification of gaps in certain aspects of speech activity: phonetic, grammatical, lexical, auditory and speech;
- the combination of part-time employment with day-time education, which results in the need for self-directed study of selected topics.
- the desire to deepen or diversify their knowledge and skills in ESP, taking into account the requirements and specifics of the field of their future professional activities as an international economist (medical, metallurgical, educational, food, etc.), which requires the acquisition of a foreign language at a level not lower than B2;
- training in the program "Double Degree" as a result of which a student twice a year misses classes in the main University. As a rule, students studying on such a program are able to self-organize and study some ESP topics independently;
- preparing for External Independent Assessment in ESP for admission to the master's program, or for the international exam for obtaining an international certificate B2;
- There are a number of economic benefits of SD ESPL:
- promotes the student's well-being as it allows combining work with studies at the University;
- there is no need for a tutor;
- is a good investment in future professional and career success with adequate material remuneration;
- develops positive personality qualities: persistence, dedication, responsibility, intelligence, creativity, which increases the competitiveness of a specialist in the labor market.

Self-directed ESP learning could be a “remedy” for Ukrainian Universities in terms of student self-work organization subject to some changes being introduced into University Curriculum and a relevant in-service training of ESP teachers.

ESP Course with a Self-directed Learning Component

English for specific purposes is a term that refers to teaching or studying English for a particular career (like law, medicine) or for business in general (*International Teacher Training Organization, 2005*). ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register, skills, discourse and appropriate genres).

English for Business and Economics (EBE), by and large the most popular form of ESP. EBE is taught in both private and public universities in Ukraine.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) National Curriculum for Universities (*National Curriculum for Universities, 2005*) encourages lifelong learning and autonomy. The ESP Curriculum is a tool for promoting learner autonomy and critical awareness of learning styles. It focuses on the generic skills of critical thinking, problem solving, presenting ideas, etc. In this way it helps develop the students' language, pragmatic and intercultural language competence, and thereby their capacity for independent language learning

The advanced course of ESP in Economic Universities has its own specifics, which consists in the fact that this discipline is an integral component of professional competence of students of such specialties as International Economics, International Economic Relations, International Trade, International Business Tourism and Hotel Business. The advanced ESP course is preceded by an in-depth study of the English language course for 4 semesters of 8 hours per week. This means that students of these specialties have a basis for a self-directed study of ESP.

Who is the Self-directed ESP Learner?

A highly self-directed learner is one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her time and set an appropriate pace for learning, and to develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal-oriented (*Guglielmino, 1977-1978: 73*).

What is known about SDL “(a) individual learners can become empowered to take increasingly more responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavor; (b) self-direction is best viewed as a continuum or characteristic that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation; (c) self-direction does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others; (d) self-directed learners appear able to transfer learning, in terms of both knowledge and study skill, from one situation to another; (e) self-directed study can involve various activities and resources, such as self-guided reading, participation in study groups, internships, electronic dialogue, and reflective writing activities; (f) effective roles for teachers in self-directed learning are possible, such as dialogue with learners, securing resources, evaluating outcomes, and promoting critical thinking” (*Hiemstra, 1994*).

Why are the students, who study the ESP course in-depth, most suitable for self-directed learning? Because these students:

- have already acquired a rather high level of language and speech skills in English;
- have some strategy for self-learning a foreign language: they are able to use paper and electronic dictionaries, electronic translators, know where to find electronic grammar directories, thanks to the elective course "The art of presentation" can prepare a presentation in English and the like;
- can make an almost adequate self-identification of their gaps in all aspects of speech activity: speaking, reading, listening and writing;
- those who are already working part-time in a specialty that requires foreign language proficiency, as well as those who have already decided in which area they will work as economists, know what vocabulary they need to further learn, which skills to acquire, what gaps in knowledge must be eliminated and can be more self-motivated for SD ESPL;
- are more interested in in-depth ESP learning, as it is their choice, and are more likely to be self-motivated for SD ESPL.

On the Role of the Teacher in Involving Students in Self-Directed ESP Learning

With the new paradigm of learning, University teachers have an unprecedented opportunity to redefine their roles and scale of self-directed ESP learning like never before.

The role of the teacher in self-directed learning consists in cultivating self-directed learners: "The teacher shifts from recitation to provocation, from telling to asking, and from instruction to guidance, teaching students to think and find out for themselves." (*Gibbons, 2003: 24*).

The role of a teacher in organizing self-directed ESP training in the conditions of the Ukrainian Economic University is to:

- create favorable conditions for SD ESPL;
- build a co-operative learning environment;
- encourage students to develop SD ESPL skills by using a task based approach;
- help the student get self motivated towards SD ESPL;
- to develop recommendations, memos, algorithms of SD ESPL organization;
- make an indicative list of alternative paper and virtual textbooks, audio and video courses, sites, blogs, etc.;
- compile a list of possible forms of reporting on SD ESPL results;
- be available for consultations as appropriate during learning process;
- if necessary, create conditions for public presentation of SD ESPL results in the classroom;
- evaluate SD ESPL results;
- serve as an advisor rather than formal instructor.
- There are several ways to foster ESP learner autonomy:
 - Resource-based approach that implies independent use of ESP learning materials;
 - Technology based approach that includes computer-assisted ESP language and computer mediated communication;
 - ESP Curriculum-based approach ensures learner involvement in decision making, regarding course design process: learner goals, the language learning process, tasks, learner strategies and reflection on learning.

- Learner-based approach is aimed at training learners' metacognitive knowledge and skills in order to develop learner autonomy;
- Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach makes a real-life situation for language development and motivates the students toward learning a language;
- Task based activities and project oriented curricula.

Classroom-Based Assessments of SD ESPL Outcomes

There are two ways of assessing student SD ESPL outcomes: self-assessment and classroom-based assessment. Most SDL scholars believe that within the SDL framework, learners are responsible to monitor and evaluate their own learning. This is not the purpose of this paper to revolve around the issue of SDL assessment, but in a University context both types of assessment are equally important. Teacher (grade-based) and peer assessment might contribute to self-assessment and serve as criteria for self-assessment of SDL outcomes. There are several forms of reporting on the results of CDL ESPL in the context of Economics University that are subject to classroom-based assessment. Teacher (grade-based) and peer assessment might contribute to self - assessment and serve as criteria for self-assessment of SDL outcomes.

- Power Point presentation;
- writing a written report, an essay;
- an oral report;
- an article for a student Scientific Conference;
- creating a video;
- writing individual, course, diploma paper on a specialty in a foreign language;
- development of business role-playing games;
- writing module test;
- an interview with the teacher and the like.

Conclusions and suggestions

Self-directed learning is a key component of advanced English for Specific Purposes learning (ESP) in Ukrainian Economic University in the time of economic crisis. Self-directed learning means a person is able to choose what to learn to achieve her/his overall goals, knows how to learn it, and is able to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in practice. Under CDL there is a shift from teacher –centered to learner-centered pedagogy. To implement SD ESPL into ESP classroom the teachers have to undergo a relevant in-service training in SDL. The students, who study the ESP course in-depth and whose future profession requires a high level of English proficiency are most suitable for self-directed learning because they have a basis for it and they are more likely to become self-motivated towards SD ESPL. Further research in the SDL field might be concerned with the issues of self-motivation and accuracy and reliability of self-assessment.

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