

## **Raising Teachers' Awareness of Learner Autonomy: Implications for the Ukrainian Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study is intended to attract attention to the problem of implementation of the construct of learner autonomy into the system of higher education in Ukraine. Although the concept of learner autonomy has a long tradition in the European educational systems, it is still in the process of its formation in Ukraine due to certain cultural and historical factors that defined the development of the Ukrainian society for the last century. Therefore, the research is concerned with the investigation of the current level of teachers' awareness and skills to enhance learner autonomy taking into account its socio-political prerequisites. The data for the study are obtained from the questionnaires filled by 167 Ukrainian university students of the 1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> years of study majoring in translation at the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation from English, Institute of Philology, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. The survey is aimed at measuring teachers' capacity to develop students' autonomy in learning English as a foreign language. The data analysis contributed to tracing success in implementing learner autonomy in a foreign language classroom (i.e. teachers' flexibility and accommodation to students' needs, high level of scaffolding and development of students' critical thinking), as well as detecting key problems that still need to be solved in order to promote teachers' assistance in the development of learner autonomy (i.e. provision of learning resources necessary for self-study, encouragement of peer- and self-assessment, explanation of task objectives).

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, learner autonomy, Ukrainian higher education

## 1. Introduction

The construct of learner autonomy has a long history of establishment and development in the American and European education systems. In modern education it is a basic principle of students' progress, which states learner capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little, 1991:4). This makes the concept of learner autonomy not only one of the fundamentals of a successful learning process, but also its legitimate and desirable goal, as the concept of autonomy is grounded in a natural tendency for learners to take control over their study (Benson, 2011:2), which in its turn, results in effective learning.

Until 1991, the year when Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, its educational policy conformed to the principles of communism that regulated all spheres of society functioning, which therefore, were reflected in methods and approaches to teaching. The Soviet state declared total teachers' control over the educational process by means of setting strict limits on the areas of knowledge students were exposed to, and proclaiming the dominance of social interests over individual ones (Исторические материалы, n.d.). Such governmental policy allowed no free development of a personality, and therefore, the construct of learner autonomy was irrelevant within the given historical context.

In recent decades the concept of learner autonomy has gained extreme importance in the Ukrainian system of education. By signing the Bologna declaration on the European Higher Education Area in 2005 and the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement in 2014, Ukraine took the path of convergence of its educational policy with the European traditions of education, and breakup with the Soviet legacy in the sphere. For this reason, the enhancement of learner autonomy in the Ukrainian system of education is a sign not only of the adoption of modern teaching methods, but also of the declaration of pro-democratic ideas and the individual right to freedom, because the conception of a personal autonomy as an ability to freely direct the course of his or her own life (Young, 1986:19) constitutes the fundamental ground for the idea of autonomy in learning (Benson, 2008:18).

As learner autonomy involves reflection, interaction and experimentation (Schwienhorst, 2009), the process of its development should imply the enhancement of the aforementioned skills. However, students' progress in achieving a high level of awareness of the autonomy advantages depends mainly on teachers' willingness and efforts to boost students' confidence as autonomous learners. Therefore, in the context of a current approach to education teachers have acquired a new role of introducing the methodology of autonomous learning in a classroom. As 28 years of independence are not enough for raising a new generation of teachers, whose education would be based on the principle of learner autonomy, the Ukrainian education authorities should, first of all, find ways to introduce this concept to teachers, focusing on the issues that cause problems for both teachers and learners. Therefore, this research is aimed at finding out the strong and weak areas in the teaching process from the point of view of the development of learner autonomy, which may facilitate the implementation of this construct into the system of higher education in Ukraine.

## 2. Method

### Participants

167 undergraduate students of the 1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> years of study (44 students of the 1<sup>st</sup> year; 41 students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 39 students of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year; 43 students of the 4<sup>th</sup> year) majoring in translation from English at the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation from English, Institute of Philology, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, participated in the survey. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 24 years. Among the interviewed there were 23 men and 144 women. The data were collected in September 2019 (autumn semester).

### Instruments and procedures

Methodologically, the survey is based on the understanding of a teacher as a counselor, facilitator and resource for learning (Little, 1991:44-45; Benson, 2001). These roles presuppose teacher's confidence in the autonomous approach he/she adopted; confidence to stop talking in favor of students' talk; confidence in learners – that they already know a great deal and possess the ability to exploit this knowledge productively (Wright, 1987). Therefore, the purpose of the questionnaire was to assess teacher's success in achieving the aforementioned roles from the learners' point of view. For this reason, the questionnaire contained statements about teachers' methods and approaches to teaching a foreign language.

Learners assessed the statements according to the five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was anonymous, and all students were informed about the purpose of the research. It required approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

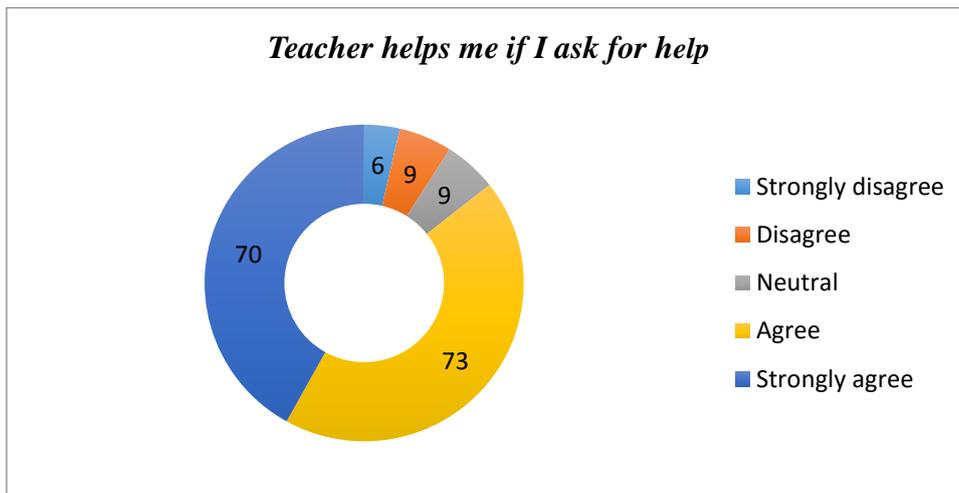
### Ethical considerations

All students were informed about the study purpose, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, and the way the data would be used. They signed an informed consent to participate in the survey. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Supervisors of the Institute of Philology of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

### 3. Results and discussion

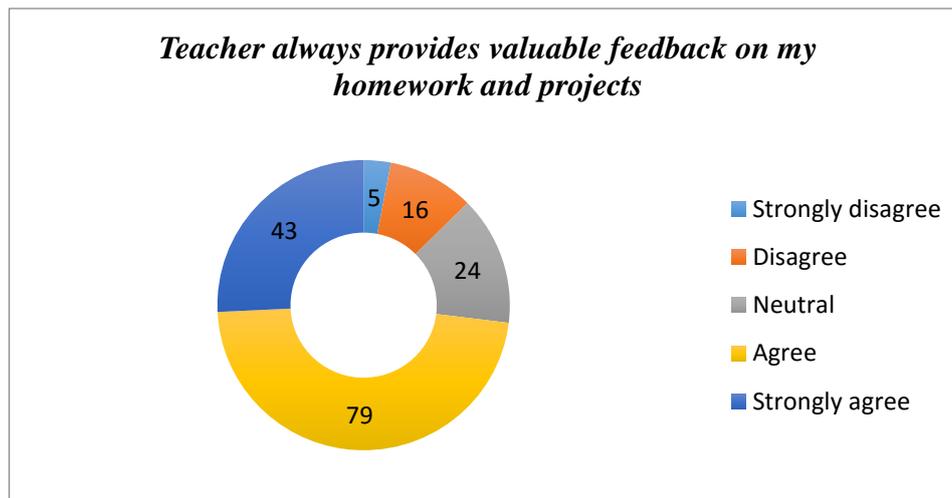
#### Part 1. Teacher as counselor

*Statement 1*



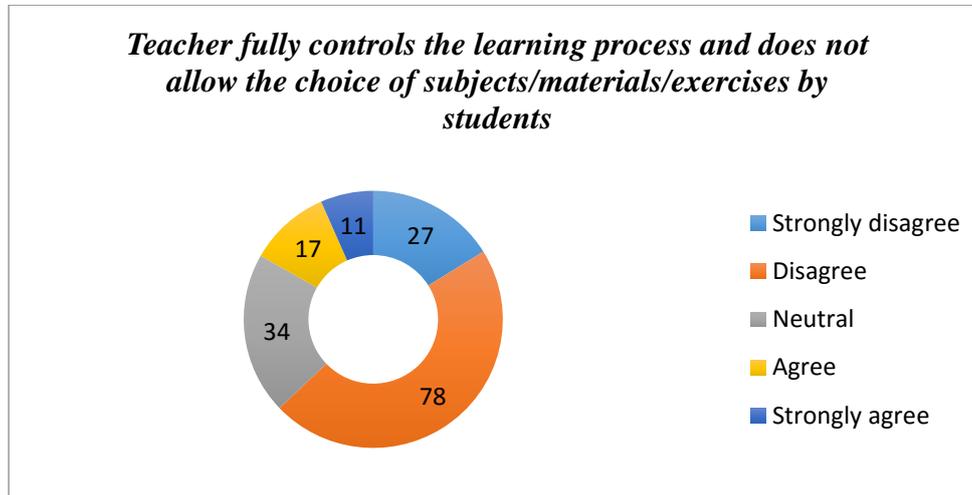
86% of students agreed with the statement (opted for Agree and Strongly Agree). These are good results, as they represent a high level of teachers' involvement into the learning process and their readiness to meet students' individual needs. By scaffolding their learners, teachers can also increase students' engagement into a topic, and therefore, motivation to learn. As motivation and autonomy share a central concern with active learner involvement, and enhanced motivation is conditional upon learners taking responsibility for their own learning (Blidi, 2017:104), teacher's role of a helper and counselor in the process of building learner autonomy cannot be underestimated. Thus, the attention of education authorities should also be directed towards decreasing the number of students who disagreed with the statement: 4% of students opted for Strongly Disagree, 5% of students chose Disagree. In addition, 5% of students stayed neutral, which also shows their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. For this reason, the development of teachers' self-directed skills and raising their awareness of the concept of learner autonomy are the first steps the Ukrainian education authorities should take in order to improve the situation.

*Statement 2*



One of the most valuable aspects of effective feedback is its ability to foster learner autonomy. Students tend to become self-regulated learners, when they are provided with detailed feedback on their performance, as well as guidance for further improvement. Evidence of this self-regulatory process can be seen in an increasing ability to align aspects of thinking, motivation and behavior with assessment criteria, standards and learning outcomes as well as learning goals established by the learners themselves (Mistry, 2013:11). Therefore, the fact that the majority of students agreed with the statement (chose Agree and Strongly Agree options) indicates a positive tendency in building learner autonomy. However, 13% of the students disagreed with the statement (chose Disagree and Strongly Disagree options), and 14% opted for Neutral. It means that more than one fourth of students are not satisfied with the quality of teacher's feedback. This is a powerful signal for the necessity to raise teachers' awareness of what valuable feedback is, and how to provide it without diminishing students' confidence and motivation to learn. This will help teachers' build closer rapport with their students and therefore, improve communication with each other.

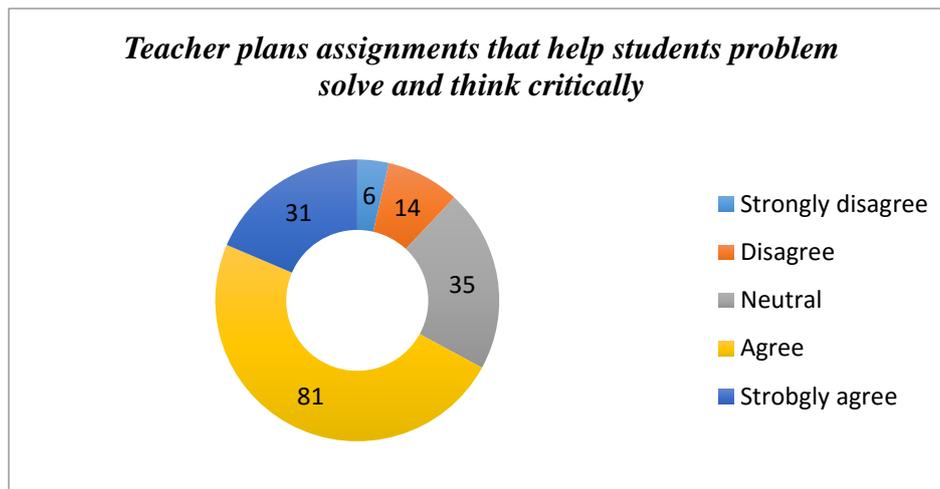
*Statement 3*



The majority of students (63%) disagreed with the statement (opted for Disagree and Strongly Disagree), which lays the solid groundwork for building learner autonomy among Ukrainian students. By allowing learners to make choices on what materials to access, and how to use them, teachers encourage their students to become more reflective, more critical and increasingly responsible for their own learning (Reinders & Hubbard, 2014:366; Blin, 1999). Nevertheless, the data also demonstrate a tendency towards full teachers' control over the learning process, as 17% of the students disagreed with the statement and 20% stayed neutral. Such situation may be explained by the culture of education established during the Soviet times, which still has strong influence on the Ukrainian education. As a teacher was always considered to be a key personality in the learning process, he/she retained all power over the choice of materials, and due to political reasons provided students only with the information approved by the authorities. The change of paradigm towards democracy in state and educational policy demands the implementation of new approaches to teaching and learning, which presupposes the implementation of teacher-training programs as one of the facets of building the construct of learner autonomy.

**Part 2. Teacher as facilitator**

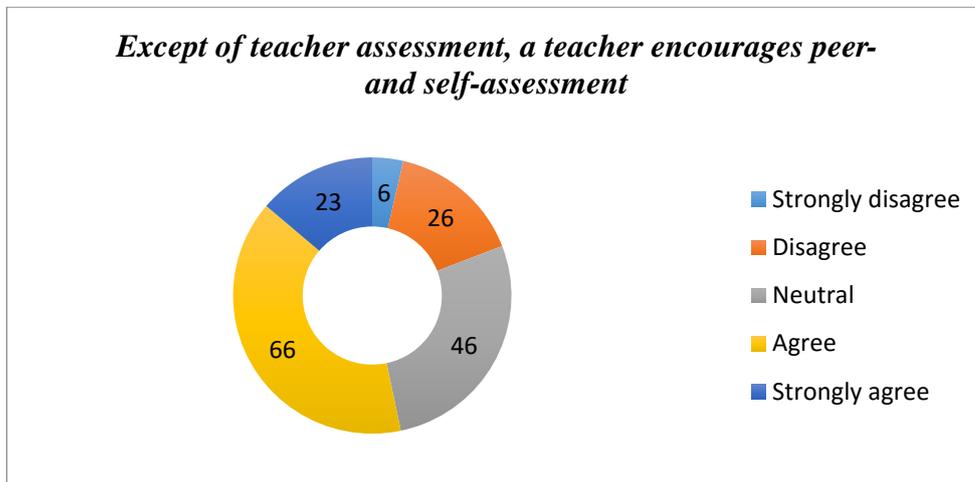
*Statement 4*



As autonomous learning focuses on each student’s ability to act independently, and attitude towards taking responsibility for the learning process, both of which necessarily involve metacognition, strategic competence, reflection, choice and decision-making (Merrotsy, 2017), the skills of effective problem-solving and critical thinking are the basis for successful planning and decisions implementation. Therefore, students’ assessment of the given statement indicates a positive trend in the Ukrainian educational policy (68% of students agreed with it) aimed at developing learners’ self-directed skills. However, 21% of students opted for Neutral, which together with 12% of students who disagreed with the statement signal about the necessity to raise teachers’ awareness of the issue.

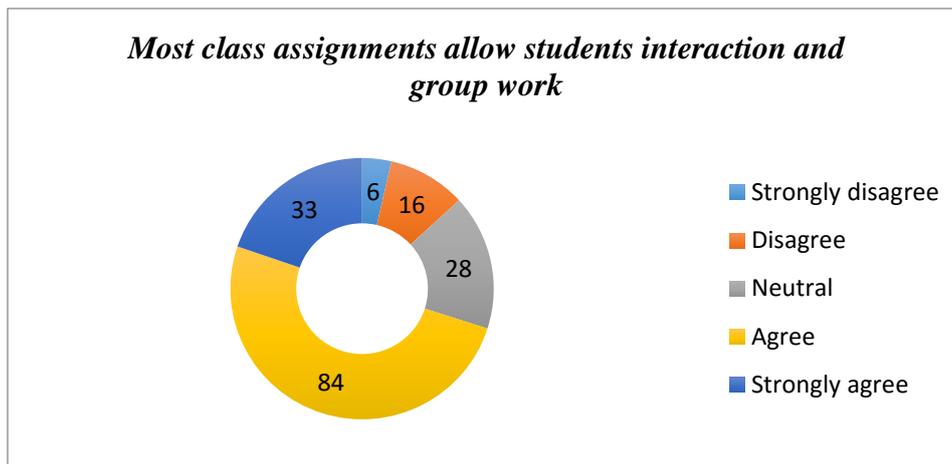
The implementation of teacher-training programs is of pivotal importance in the times of a shift from the understanding of a teacher as an ultimate source of knowledge and power in the educational process to his/her recognition as a self-directed learner and practitioner, facilitator and counselor, coordinator and resource. Hence, in the context of the development of students’ skills of problem-solving and critical thinking teachers should be aware of their functions of (1) helping learners to plan and carry out the independent learning by means of needs analysis, objective setting, work planning, selecting materials, and organizing interactions; (2) helping learners to evaluate themselves; (3) helping students identify their learning styles and appropriate learning strategies (Voller, 1997:102).

*Statement 5*



As self- and peer-assessment involves studying one's own performance in relation to strengths, improvements, and insights (Cullen, Harris & Hill, 2012:129), it helps to develop learners' capacity for reflection and self-analysis (Little, 2011), and to become more self-conscious or intentional about their learning (Cullen, Harris & Hill, 2012). Therefore, raising teachers' awareness of the necessity to foster these kinds of assessment cannot be underestimated in modern Ukrainian educational policy. The survey results show a high level of self- and peer-assessment in the English learning classroom (54% of students agreed with the statement). However, 28% of students opted for Neutral, and 20% – for Disagree and Strongly Disagree. It means that almost a half of surveyed students are not involved into such activities. As students' skills of self-analysis and self-consciousness in the learning process were neglected in the Soviet education system, the generations of teachers brought up in those times are not aware of the necessity to develop these skills in their learners nowadays. This is a negative tendency, which has to be changed in the nearest future, because self- and peer-assessment seeks to foster continuity between the development of learners' strategic competence and the development of their strategic control of the learning process (Little, 1997:31), a fundamental of autonomous learning.

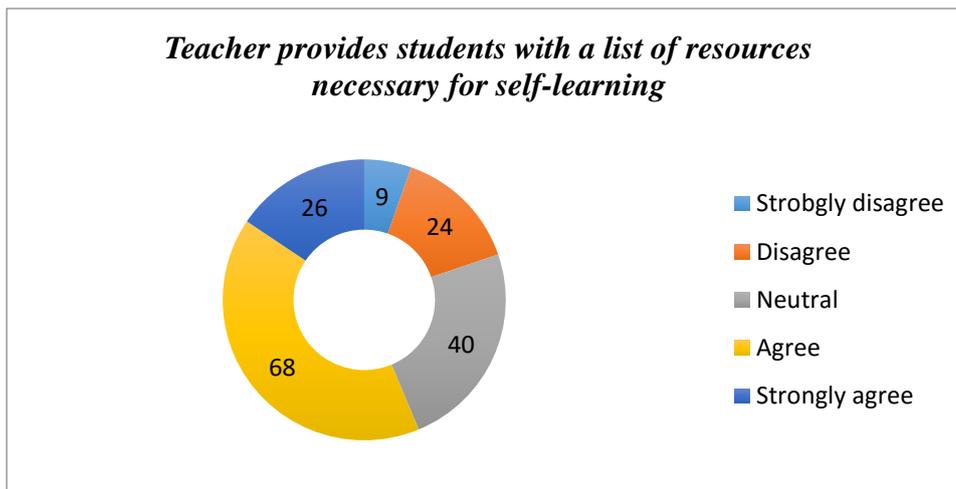
*Statement 6*



Students' collaboration and group work are the modes of interaction that promote learner autonomy and therefore, facilitate the move towards learner-centeredness (Dam, 1990; Schwienhorst, 2012). The results of the survey show that such activities are frequently used by teachers, which is an indicator of successful implementation of the concept of learner autonomy into the system of education in Ukraine. The process of developing students' skills of interaction and group work may, however, take time and more research on the issue, as the goal of teaching any foreign language in the Soviet Union was to develop minimum productive skills, and all students' efforts were focused on doing grammar exercises and translating selected texts (Ivanova and Tivyaeva, 2015:316). Therefore, the radical change of a paradigm towards autonomy and individualism in learning should take place together with the search of new teaching methods, taking into account learners' culture and established pedagogical tradition.

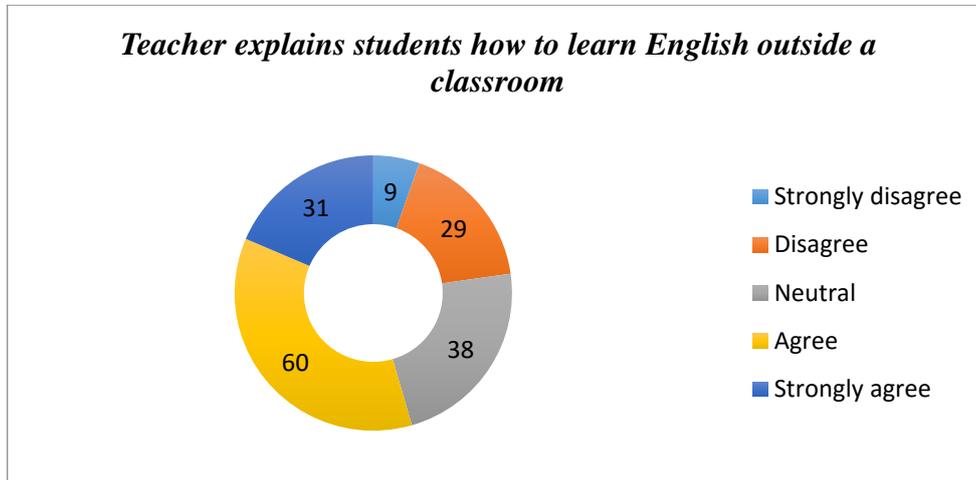
**Part 3. Teacher as resource**

*Statement 7*



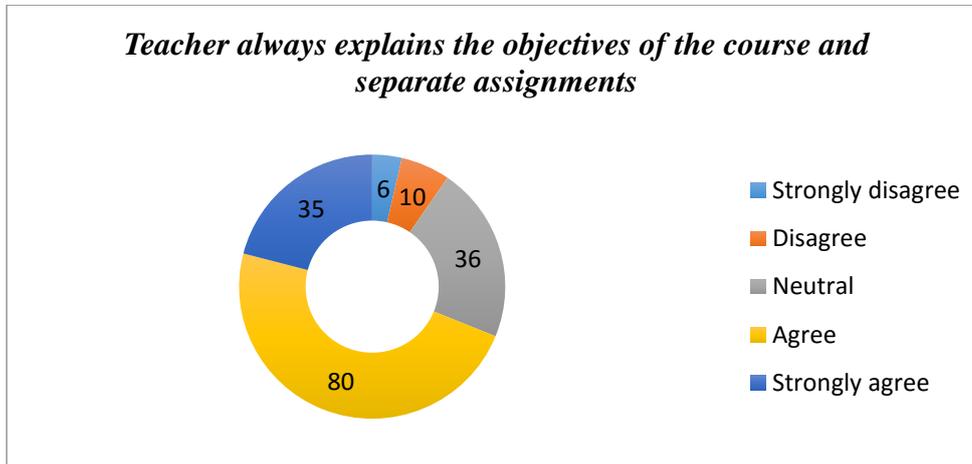
A shift towards learner autonomy demands the promotion of teacher-training programs aimed to prepare educators with the professional knowledge and skills in assuming a new role in autonomous learning contexts – material provider (Lai, 2017:135). By providing students' with all resources necessary for self-learning, and explaining how to use them, a teacher gives his/her learners a freedom to act independently and focus on their personal needs, strengths and weaknesses. Taking into account the pedagogical tradition established during the last century (due to political reasons a teacher retained in his/her hands all the power and control over the educational process), the change of teachers' understanding of his/her role in teaching and learning may take both time and commitment of the education authorities and teachers themselves: although 57% of students agreed with the statement (opted for Agree and Strongly Agree), still 24% of students stayed neutral and 19% of learners disagreed (opted for Disagree and Strongly Disagree). Such results indicate a good start in raising teachers' awareness of their new roles in the educational process, but also point at the necessity to put more effort in the teachers' education.

*Statement 8*



The fact that only 55% of students agreed with the statement proves that teachers' intentions to raise learners' awareness of autonomy in their studies are rather occasional than systematic, and depend mainly on teacher's willingness to help students instead of the general recommendations of the education authorities. Because of the multifaceted nature of learner autonomy, which includes such aspects as personal attitude, willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management), learner control, and individual pursuit of learning opportunities in the natural societal setting (Pemberton, 1996:3), this issue requires more governmental and institutional attention, because in order to feel confident in learning outside a classroom, students need a whole range of skills and competences acquired in a classroom. This is particularly important in the context of an educational shift towards individualism within the group-oriented learning culture established during the Soviet times. The governmental support may help teachers get more understanding of the concept of learner autonomy, extra skills to implement it into the learning process, and extra opportunities to find new ways of building up students' confidence as autonomous learners.

*Statement 9*



Students' assessment of this statement (69% of the students opted for Agree and Strongly Agree) demonstrates a positive trend in the development of learners' self-directed skills. Clear understanding of the task objectives is the first step towards the independent choice of materials by students, as in such a way learners are taught to establish the link between the task/exercise rubric and its purpose related to the development of real-life skills, and to identify the value of materials in terms of their relation to student's personal needs and interests. Therefore, the explanation of the course/assignment objectives to learners is a powerful tool of raising their interest and motivation in the educational process, which is one of the main goals of the modern Ukrainian educational policy. However, 22% of students chose Neutral option and 10% disagreed with the statement. It means, teachers need more training aimed at promoting the concept of learner autonomy, explaining its relevance to the teaching and learning process, showing the advantages of its implementation into a classroom, and helping to find ways of its application to students' special needs and learning styles.

#### 4. Conclusion

The conducted research was aimed at measuring the degree of teachers' awareness of the issue of learner autonomy and the necessity of its implementation into the educational process. The findings of the study have important implications for the advancement of the modern Ukrainian educational policy towards the individualism and learner-centeredness, which mark a radical change of a pedagogical paradigm and breaking up with the Soviet traditions of education based on the group-oriented nature of the learning process and its total control by a teacher.

The results of the survey point at the achievements of the Ukrainian system of higher education on its way to the implementation of the construct of learner autonomy, as well as indicate main problems that still need to be overcome. Teachers' scaffolding and accommodation to students' needs, providing feedback on learners' work, development of their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as promotion of students' interaction and group work in a classroom show success in raising teachers' awareness of their roles as counselors and facilitators. Nevertheless, teachers still do not have full understanding of their role as a resource, as the results of the survey show they do not provide students with a list of resources necessary for self-learning, rarely explain how to learn outside of a classroom, and do not consider the explanation of the course/assignment objectives as one of the fundamentals of successful learning. Thus, the study proved a significant development of the Ukrainian educational system towards the implementation of the European principles of teaching and learning, and outlined the main directions for further improvement, which demands efforts of both education authorities and teachers themselves.

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