

EFL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS AS RESEARCHERS: TEACHING PROCESS ADVANTAGES

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Abstract

The paper focuses on presuming teaching process advantages of university learners' research in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training, comprising, in the author's situation, English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), based on existing data. Research concept is defined and its characteristics are outlined in terms of student research relevance. Examples of EFL university student research tasks are provided. Students' research benefits are considered mainly with respect to language awareness (LA) and learner autonomy (LrA) enhancement. Conclusion treats the expected connectedness between EFL learner research and learners' communicative competence improvement.

Keywords: learner research, EFL learner research, language awareness, learner autonomy, teaching process effectiveness

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Introduction

Student research-related issues, especially in terms of higher education, have been topical over the last years, research providing many opportunities to university learners in all spheres of study for collecting specific relevant information, analyzing accumulated data and, based on gathered information, building and verifying hypotheses, making conclusions as to studied subjects' essence and functioning, and thus, improving aspects of learner theoretical as well as practical knowledge.

The present paper aims at revealing the presumed importance of university learners' research with respect to teaching process parameters improvement in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) including, in the author's situation, English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) subtypes. EFL students' research is supposed to have a significant positive impact on learners' language awareness (LA) and learner autonomy (LrA) advance, based on the examined in this publication benefits of students'

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research in general as well as on already controlled by the author smaller pieces of learners' investigation within the framework of language learning strategies (LLS) teaching; these results are in line with the positive outcomes of a successful business ESP project work (PW), supervised by the author, PW involving research, a considerable amount of which relates to cognitive and metacognitive LLS implementation (Ruzhekova-Rogozherova, 2022).

The study will develop in compliance with the following layout. First, research will be defined with respect to crucial features, components, methodology and research principles will be delineated. Second, student research relevance will be highlighted and motivated in terms of learner achievements. Next, research matters will be commented on in relation to their implication in EFL teaching in university context and student research tasks will be put forward based on the current article author studies. Finally, conclusion will be made as to the expected EFL (EGP and ESP) student research significance concerning LA and LrA enhancement, and, thus, communicative competence improvement.

Research definitions. Students' research importance

There is a significant number of definitions of *research* to be referred to. Thus, for example, research represents:

- “the careful consideration of study regarding a particular concern or research problem using scientific methods” (Fleetwood, 2022, p. 2);
- “the collecting of information about a particular subject” (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, n.d., p. 5);
- “the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings” (Western Sidney University, 2020, p. 1);
- “a process of systematic inquiry that entails collection of data; documentation of critical information; and analysis and interpretation of that data/information, in accordance with suitable methodologies set by specific professional fields and academic disciplines” (Hampshire College, 2022, p. 1);
- “Careful study of a given subject, field, or problem, undertaken to discover facts or principles (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2011, cited in The Free Dictionary by Farlex, n.d., p. 1) or
- “a seeking of knowledge, data, or the truth about something” (The American Heritage Roget's Thesaurus, 2014, cited in The Free Dictionary by Farlex, n.d., p. 5).

Quite evidently, based on the above, the essential features of research work encompass the components of data collection, their careful examination and

analysis with respect to a specific professional problem by means of scientific methods, all these processes leading to new concepts formation, unveiling regularities, penetrating the real foundations of a field, etc.

It needs to be noted that all activity has its fundamentals; thus, for example, some most crucial research underlying principles are related to “respect for the integrity of knowledge, collegiality, honesty, objectivity, and openness”, “**commitment to dissemination, critical evaluation, and rigorous training**” (National Academy of Sciences (US), National Academy of Engineering (US), and Institute of Medicine (US), 1992, pp. 1, 23).

Is research suitable to university students, in general and, thus, to EFL learners, do they need to embark (together with lecturers or individually) on investigation and studies in order to achieve required knowledge or are they inherently supposed to receive it directly as a result of provided training by university teachers, competent researchers and authors of specialized books and manuals? Which approach (exploratory, lecturer-based or mixed one) do higher school learners have to adopt in the objective of obtaining high-quality general and specialized competence in taught subjects, knowledge which can be implemented successfully further on in learners’ theoretical and practical endeavours and this way, precondition next level of proficiency construction?

University learners, however talented they may be, need support in terms of research guidance, study activities explanation, close communication with experienced scientists and regular feedback as to students’ results, provided by lecturers. Teachers’ and students’ joint research effort is worth investing in education, though the process may be time-consuming, as investigation preconditions much more significant learner achievements based on improved understanding, interest and motivation; advanced learners may of course also benefit from more individual research. This statement is in line with below referred to sources, among others.

Research is valuable to university learners as:

- “It promotes ‘partnerships’ in which students work alongside teachers” (Fielding and Bragg, 2003, p. 4);
- Contributes to the formation “amongst students and teachers” of “a sense of shared responsibility for the quality and conditions of teaching and learning” (Fielding and Bragg, 2003, p. 4);
- Facilitates learners to become “engaged, reflective, confident and self-directed” (Fielding and Bragg, 2003, p. 6)²;

² Although this source refers to high school students’ exploration of learning and teaching in their educational context, the statement applies to university learners to even greater extent.

- Students learn “how to do interviews, focus groups, transcripts, participant observation and field notes, surveys, and data analysis and presentation” (Rose, 2009, p. 286);
- Students learn about their research spheres and become enthusiastic about science. They are given the opportunity not only to work with a university supervisor, but also to communicate with researchers from other institutions. Higher school learners’ study is beneficial to their institutions and they view themselves as “knowledge creators” (Stojavljevic, 2017, p. 5);
- Learners acquire more complete grasp of research work, find out scientific fields they are motivated to explore, learn to work in a team as well as individually, engage in interdisciplinary research matters (Madan and Teitge, 2013);
- Research promotes intellectual development, improves knowledge, contributes to more efficient theory grasping and to novel ideas appearance, enhances reading and writing competences, preconditions correct/inaccurate data discrimination, widens horizons as to possible future objectives (Azim, 2020);

Research contributes to knowledge elucidation, deep comprehension of topic; students learn about research approaches and how to conduct analysis, observation, conclusion-making, to hypothesize (Reddy, 2016);

It is crucially important to university learners to cultivate “the ability to investigate problems, make judgments on the basis of sound evidence, take decisions on a rational basis, and understand what they are doing and why” due to these skills relevance in terms of future specialists’ professional paths (Healey and Jenkins, 2009, p. 10).

EFL (EGP and ESP) university learners’ research. Research tasks

The advantages of EFL (EGP and ESP) university learners’ research comply, in the author’s view, with the already presented ones, EFL knowledge being part of overall scientific knowledge and, thus, being acquired, constructed and developed based on similar cognition principles, though specifically implemented, depending on each research field characteristics. Needless to affirm, EFL learners’ investigation involves procedures, which can be lecturer-guided, first, and then, more independently performed by students, such as pattern observation; language and linguistic data collection and analysis; hypothesizing about categories values and functioning; proving or rejecting hypotheses; comparing grammar and vocabulary categories with converging or diverging ones in terms of form/ semantics; contrasting categories with their form/semantics equivalents in native language (NL) and/or another foreign language (FL_n); exploring context,

predetermining specific values appearance; observation of skills and knowledge practising in order to detect learning hardships and explain them in terms of their etiology, etc. All these exploratory procedures, methods or approaches belong to frequently applied in author's research and practice cognitive and metacognitive LLS, the implementation of which is responsible for constructing and improving various spheres of LA (Ruzhekova-Rogozherova, 2022), and, thus, LrA, the highest degree of which is represented by learners' involvement in training their peers and in language research (Nunan, 1997; Nunan, 2003), activities tightly and positively dependent on LA parameters.

Two research tasks are offered as follows to exemplify student exploration anticipated advantages in terms of teaching process quality enhancement. Both tasks can be implemented in EGP and ESP by means of adaptation, the first one being, though, more suitable to ESP, whereas the second one – to EGP learners.

Task 1 presentation

Task 1 material applied by Ruzhekova-Rogozherova (Ruzhekova-Rogozherova, 2015) is abridged and its use differs from the source one, the task being implemented not for the purpose of lead-in grammar teaching stage carrying out, but in the objective of teaching research skills to university learners in terms of grammar categories forms, values and use, in ESP context namely. Learners are provided with practical grammar sources references they can consult before, while and/or after working on the task in order to adjust, correct and modify, if needed, their views. Having completed the task, students share the information obtained with their colleagues and the lecturer; they are welcome to ask questions, put forward teaching/learning suggestions, practical implementation ideas, start discussions, speak about explanation grasping difficulties or lack of comprehension problems. They can even try to reveal possible underlying reasons for experienced hardships in terms of knowledge acquisition and LLS application. Doing so, students are expected to engage in various research practices involving LLS implementation (Ruzhekova-Rogozherova, 2022) and, consequently, enhance their LA and LrA.

Task 1

Explore the following English paragraphs and their Bulgarian counterparts in order to make conclusions as to the *English perfect* and the *English simple past* values and use. State the observed equivalences. Compare *English perfect* and *simple past* instances with corresponding Bulgarian translations in terms of form and meaning. Try to provide explanation in the perspective of referred to practical

grammar sources. Some phrases and vocabulary underlining will facilitate your research³.

(1) “The *recent* disaster in Fukushima *has* clearly *demonstrated* that, while nuclear power plants emit almost no greenhouses gases, in the wake of accidents they can be extremely harmful to the environment (Shentov, Stoyanov and Yordanova, 2011, p. 56).

(1a) “*Неотдавнашната* катастрофа във Фукушима недвусмислено *показва*, че макар атомните електроцентрали на практика да не отделят почти никакви парникови газове, въздействието им върху околната среда може да бъде изключително вредно.” (Шентов, Стоянов и Йорданова, 2011, с. 62).

(2) “*For years* governments *have tried to reach* climate change and energy targets through quick fixes, such as replacing coal with natural gas.” (Shentov, Stoyanov and Yordanova, 2011, p. 56).

(2a) “*В продължение на години* европейските правителства *се опитват да постигнат* целите, поставени пред енергетиката в контекста на климатичните промени, посредством бързи решения, едно от които е заместването на въглищата с газ” (Шентов, Стоянов и Йорданова, 2011, с. 62).

(3) “The increase of R&D expenditure should essentially exceed GDP growth which *has rarely happened in the last decade*. (...) R&D expenditure in the sectors of higher education and enterprises *has increased* by an identical rate (slightly 3.6-fold) and merely twice larger sums *have been distributed* for the state sector (publicly funded research units, BAS, AA)” (Petrov, Georgieva and Stefanov, 2011, p. 32).

(3a) “Необходимо е ръстът на разходите за изследователска и развойна дейност да превишава съществено ръста на БВП, което *през последното десетилетие се е случвало рядко*. (...) С еднакъв темп *нарастват* разходите за НИРД в секторите „Висше образование” и „Предприятия” (малко над 3,6 пъти) и едва 2 пъти по-големи суми *се разпределят* за държавния сектор (ведомствени изследователски звена, БАН, ССА) (Петров, Георгиева и Стефанов, 2011, с. 32).

(4) “Bulgaria’s membership in the European Union *was accompanied* by high expectations for improvement of the business climate and the living standards in the country. The global financial and economic crisis of 2009 – 2010, however, *dealt* a severe blow to economic growth, *increased* unemployment and *reduced* private and public capacity for investment” (Petrov, Georgieva and Stefanov, 2011, p. 11).

(4a) “Членството на България в Европейския съюз *бе свързано* с множество очаквания за подобряване на бизнес климат и жизненото равнище

³ English and Bulgarian paragraphs underlining belongs to the current paper author.

в страната. Световната финансово-икономическа криза от 2008 – 2010 г. нанесе сериозен удар върху икономическия растеж, повиши безработицата и намали финансовите възможности на частния и държавния сектор за инвестиции” (Петров, Георгиева и Стефанов, 2011, с. 11).

Task 2 presentation

Task 2 is based on a study material (Soars and Soars, 2009, p. 82) excerpted by the current paper author and quoted below. This task aims at focusing learners’ attention on articles essence, values and use. Students are requested, likewise in the above assignment, to refer to recommended practical grammar sources, before, while and/or after completing the task, in the objective of improving their understanding. Learners share ideas with colleagues and lecturer, put forward suggestions, ask task-related questions, build and test hypotheses, speak about experienced understanding hardships, and try to analyze their underlying reasons. This task also requires LLS application and, accordingly, as already stated, preconditions university EFL students LA and, hence LrA improvement.

Task 2

Explore the following material in order to make conclusions as to *articles (indefinite, definite and zero article)* values and use in English. Underline different articles instances in the text below and complete a table with three columns, each column containing examples of respective article type implementation. Think about *articles* and *noun types (countable, uncountable)* connection in terms of your improved understanding. Translate the excerpt to Bulgarian and study English/Bulgarian equivalences.

“London now has a railway station that is the equal of New York’s Grand Central and the Paris Gare du Nord. St Pancras International is the UK home of Eurostar. It is a stunning Victorian station in the heart of London, with connections that spread out across the country, linking the UK with the rest of Europe.

The new station opened in 2007, and handles 50 million passengers a year. It provides access to the northern European cities of Paris, Brussels and Lille. From there you can travel to Spain, the French Alps, the south of France, and Germany. Eurostar flashes along the railway line, known as High Speed 1 (HS1), at 300 km per hour (186 mph), just as the TGV has done in France for many years. The whole area around St Pancras and King’s Cross has had a major regeneration. It is now a thriving, inner-city district, home to multinational businesses, art galleries, bars, and restaurants” (Soars and Soars, 2009, p. 82).

Conclusion

Based on current paper information, covering topics such as research essence, its features, principles, various so far revealed benefits of university learners' participation in scientific matters investigation, successfully carried out business ESP PW outcomes as well as the author's acquired experience from smaller-scale conducted EFL learner research practices in terms of LLS training, it can be concluded that:

- There is a high probability of EFL (EGP and ESP) university learners' LA enhancement stemming from cognitive and metacognitive LLS wide implementation in research process;
- LrA is likewise expected to be heightened due to already proved in applied linguistics positive and tight LA/LrA connectedness;
- Teaching process effectiveness is, consequently, expected to improve, LA and LrA greatly contributing to communicative competence;
- EFL learners will most certainly benefit from research training (lecturer-guided and individual) not only in terms of educational process amelioration, but also with respect to life-long studying abilities formation.

The paper author is planning to implement the above presented EFL learners' research tasks and share the obtained results.

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