



Autonomies/Monotonies: Teaching Languages before and after the Covid Era

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ABSTRACT: In search for a constructive response to the Covid pandemic, which exacerbated rather than caused the current crisis of university education, this article reports an implementation process of student-oriented teaching practices into an ESP curriculum of management-oriented study at a technological university, i.e., in an interdisciplinary environment, which, perhaps paradoxically, struggles with interdisciplinary approaches, deindividuation, compartmentalization of learning, and, consequently, with varying degrees of student engagement. Exploring students' (in-)ability and (un-)willingness to become autonomous learners in the Covid era and beyond, the authors rethink students' exposure to pedagogical tools and methods designed to foster student autonomy and combat instructional monotony including networking, telecollaboration, language coaching, alternative assessment methods, and discuss consumption of online education in general. Face to face with the volatile dynamics of technologically mediated interactions and evolving teacher/student roles, the article critically assesses the growing emphasis on students' autonomy which is – much like the ability to cope without social contact – often taken for granted rather than systematically trained.

KEY WORDS: ESP; Learner Autonomy; language learning; innovating curricula; assessment; constructivist pedagogies



Creative minds including Agatha Christie, Kate Nash or Neil Gaiman consider boredom to be a productive state directly linked to their creative and active selves (Thorp) while philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard, famously contemplate on its existential nature. Yet from a pedagogical perspective, boredom, defined as “a state of weariness or ennui resulting from a lack of engagement with stimuli in the environment” (“APA Dictionary of Psychology”), inevitably leads to passivity, resignation, and a lack of motivation, does not seem to be particularly productive. University language classes do not seem to be an exception.

The role of emotions in learning—including boredom—did not escape the attention of researchers. Extensive empirical research into emotions connected with university English language classes confirmed the experience of countless language learners and teachers and concluded that both “teachers and students [...] experience boredom frequently in FL [foreign language] learning” (Li *et al.* 19). Yet other studies focused on the relationship between boredom and academic performance and linked it with dropping degrees of student engagement (Cui *et al.* 2). In line with these findings, Pawlak *et al.* identified the main sources of in-class boredom as: “disengagement, monotony, and repetitiveness”, and an accompanying “lack of satisfaction and challenge” (18).

In this article, we depart from an assumption that a pedagogically desirable alternative to a bored and disengaged student is an active student who is aware of his or her autonomy, because “the more engaged the students are, the less bored they feel and the less monotonous they find the class activities” (Xie 3). Consequently, this paper focuses on possible ways of combating disengagement, monotony, and a lack of challenge by creating conditions which would empower students to take their share of responsibility for the learning process. The discussion considers recent experiences with distance learning in the Covid-era which in the Czech Republic meant three terms of online classes. Despite this, we do not see monotony and resulting disengagement as a direct result of online instruction but rather as a phenomenon that has always existed and as such predates the pandemic. Endless online classes during the pandemic in this sense simply brought up the proverbial elephant in the room: the inherent monotony and monologism of some of our pedagogies and philosophies of learning; this applies to students as well as to teachers.

The article considers if and how it is possible to mitigate the negative effects of monotony and support student autonomy by “creating a constructivist learning environment based on novel principles of teaching and learning [that] has the potential to enhance student engagement and provide better educational outcomes for learners” (Barber 10). This transformation is discussed in the light of five years of experience with implementing constructivist and student-centred strategies into a university Business English (BE) curriculum in both pre- and Covid eras.

The rationale behind this process is constructivist in the sense that it wishes to transform “the student from a passive recipient of information to an active participant in the learning process” (Education). In this respect, we assume that by making



“students construct their knowledge actively rather than just mechanically [ingest] knowledge from the teacher or the textbook” (Education), i.e., make the at least partially leave behind some of their transmissive teaching and learning routines, we will erode the monotony and monologism of their and our own learning/teaching routines.

AUTONOMY/MONOTONY

According to David Little, autonomous learners are individuals who “understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness” (qtd. in “Learner Autonomy” 1). Departing from this definition, theories of learner autonomy accentuate various assumptions directly related to its implementation. Perhaps most importantly, student autonomy seems to rely on fostering students’ “positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others” (Little, “Learner Autonomy” 2). Consequently, an autonomous learner is an individual with the capacity or ability to take the “responsibility of one’s own learning” (qtd. in Benson 22); this naturally brings a notable shift in the role of a teacher who should be able to facilitate or host this process. As Richard Benson reminds us, “the key element [...] is the idea that autonomy is an attribute of learners, rather than learning situations” (22). Fostering learner autonomy thus goes hand in hand with a transformation of students from passive consumers to active co-creators (Bovill *et al.* 6); this step should be accompanied by a systematic adoption of more personalised models of learning allowing for various degrees of freedom framed by the given curricula (Little, “Learner Autonomy” 50).

Theories of learner autonomy rely on the changes in the attitudes of teachers and specific adjustments to the curricula, stressing that “learners do not develop the ability to self-direct their learning simply by being placed in situations where they have no other option” (Benson 22). Learner autonomy thus promises to eliminate “disengagement, monotony, and repetitiveness” and “a lack of satisfaction and challenge” (Pawlak *et al.* 18) as long as teachers manage to navigate students into situations when they have to make informed decisions about their learning. This is particularly relevant in the case of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)—including Business English (BE)—which traditionally struggles with finding appropriate study materials relevant to students’ specialisation. As it should become clear, if these conditions are not met, forcing students into making choices about their learning can easily bring more frustration into their already challenging studies.

The thus question remains if and to what extent can students be expected to magically transform into engaged autonomous learners when exposed to certain pedagogic tools or methods. This is especially true in the case of students who seem to be well accustomed to traditional transmissive pedagogies and direct instruction methods and are more than happy to be passively filled up with “knowledge [...]



[existing] within the text or in the teacher” (Pratt 2-3); the same applies to students who are not necessarily familiar with the concept of learner autonomy (Yuzulia and Yusuf 62). The transition from traditional teaching and learning to more autonomous learning paradigms can be further complicated by students’ individual culturally embedded perceptions and attitudes (Missoum 79-80), language anxieties, and thinking styles (Desta 314).

As one of the key elements hindering the development of learner autonomy are monotonous teaching strategies (Yuzulia and Yusuf 62), the question of learner monotony/autonomy remains closely linked to the question of instructional design and assessment. The development of learner autonomy should consequently focus on introducing tools which empower students to safely choose authentic materials related to their study and on setting assessment methods which foster continuous formative assessment “within the framework provided by the curriculum” (Little, “Learner Autonomy” 50). The role of the teacher is to facilitate the process and make sure students’ choices are in line with the goals defined in the curriculum as well as their own interests as language learners, e.g., that students do not set goals which allow them to avoid assessing skills they find too challenging or too difficult and thereby to *economise* their learning strategies.

Within this framework, the article rethinks students’ exposure to constructivist, student-centred pedagogical tools and methods tailor-made to foster student autonomy and combat instructional monotony; generally speaking, two main areas of interest included: (1) personalised learning and (2) alternative assessment methods. These tools and methods have been piloted and partly implemented into a BE curriculum at a business school of a technological university before the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless, with the closure of higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2020, the transition to the online environment happened rapidly and many teachers who were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approaches had no option but to shift entirely to online and innovate; in other words, they were forced to adapt their teaching and assessment methodologies from face-to-face to remote instruction in a new online communication context independently on their will and with limited formal training. Moreover, this was a change connected not only to the technical infrastructure and use of new software and applications, but above all, a change connected to the shaping of new social patterns and teacher-student communication.

In addition, as a result of-Covid-social distancing between 2020 and 2021, the transition to online teaching progressed from the simple instruction continuity to an adequate instructional design in a relatively short time; despite this, owing to the freely available open educational resources developed within the earlier project outputs and previous experience, it was productive and was carried out without significant failures and difficulties. At a national educational policy level, the Czech governmental Digital Education Strategy till 2020 had a positive impact on students’ digital skills and may have helped facilitate distance learning, while different supporting projects were able to quickly mobilise resources to provide professional development and supportive professional communities (OECD 2020 Report).



If it is true that “to teach language solely through print literacy is, in current era, to short-change our students on their present and future needs” (Pegrum 3), then the forced transfer to distance learning made it clear that the need to develop learner autonomy is and has been a necessity rather than a transitory trend which will fade away with the end of the pandemic. Consequently, and given the fact that “technologically mediated interactivity is in many respects quite different from the interactivity of face-to-face encounters” (Kern, “Pharmakon” 341), educators should reconsider their traditional teaching practices, bearing in mind that distance learning with its pull towards transmissive teaching and passive information transfer models (Kern, “Language” 22) perhaps too often tends towards monologism and monotony, and therefore calls for the need for different types of learner autonomy than autonomy based exclusively on technological or digital skills.

PERSONALISED LEARNING: TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY AND EMPLOYABILITY

Although “in 2015 tertiary-educated individuals in the Czech Republic benefitted from one of the highest wage premiums relative to the upper secondary educated in the OECD, at 69% compared to 57% on average” (OECD 11), university education seems to have remained locked in the process of catching up with the realities of technologically driven industrial processes and dramatic changes in the job market. This situation is not exclusive to the Czech Republic.

While some lament the death of “a form of life in which studying and listening to lectures were certainly decisive features” and call to arms against “the technological barbarism” which brought “the cancellation from life of any experience of the senses as well as the loss of the gaze, permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen” (Agamben), others passionately argue that “the emergence of the Knowledge Society and the Knowledge-based Economy [signifies] a new era for education and training” in which “knowledge and skills of citizens are becoming increasingly important both for the economic strength and social cohesion of the society, and the quality of citizens’ life” and call for “major reforms in Education and Training, aiming at reducing the risks for knowledge gaps and social exclusion” (Sampson and Karagiannidis 1).

These and similar considerations are in line with the demands on future training and education systems which, perceiving information and communication technologies as ideal enabling technologies carrying the change, call for personalisation, interactivity, flexibility and user-centric environments where, importantly, “the learner takes responsibility for his/her own learning, and the instructor acts as the ‘guide on the side’, rather than a ‘sage on the stage’” (Sampson and Karagiannidis 3).

This perspective is in line with the position of what education theorists describe as *strong pedagogies of autonomy*, which likewise rely on “the assumption that students are ‘already autonomous’ to some degree” and maintain that “language learners are far more capable of autonomous action, especially in regard to decisions about the content



of learning, than teachers typically suppose” (Benson 24). This in turn means that if universities are to learn from corporate models of training and education, they should make sure to implement changes in their curricula which allow for and encourage greater personalisation of learning, foster learner autonomy and, eventually, encourage students to take the responsibility of one’s own learning. While this might be true with older students with at least some employment history, it does not necessarily have to be the case with all undergraduate students entering the university.

As learner autonomy is highly valued as a key transversal and/or employability skill by both educators and employers (World Economic Forum; André van Hoorn), our experience with learner autonomy departs from attempts at personalising curricula gained during international projects which brought diversity in the BE curricula by implementing teaching modules developing students’ employability and transversal skills, including teamwork skills and intercultural communicative competence. These modules are built around various forms of online intercultural exchange (OIE), defined as “the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations [...] under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (O’Dowd 2). In line with the needs of international employers’ and EUs’ needs, OIE modules have over the past twenty years become a standard tool of “intercultural competence-based training” (Hřebačková 84) in which students’ “intercultural competence, [becomes understood as] a vital competence in our contemporary world” (Dervin 7) as well as a tool for developing various facets of learner autonomy. The implementation of these modules represented the first step of the transformation process on which we build in our current considerations regarding learner autonomy. Complementing OIEs, we further focused on creating an open, “enabling education environment which will promote Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in higher education through digital technologies enhancing interdisciplinary approaches and honing transversal skills of young people to succeed in a globalised job market” (“About the Project: INCOLLAB”). Thanks to this experience, OIE modules with interdisciplinary content from related subjects of the curriculum were augmented while in many cases retaining their OIE component.

Initially, we decided to adopt a gradualist, step-by-step approach (Benson 24) towards fostering learner autonomy. Our target groups were heterogeneous, mixed-English proficiency classes of the prevailing B2 to occasional C1 language levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which means mostly independent language users, studying technological and business programmes. For these students, BE was a mandatory subject. As mentioned above, this goes hand in hand with different interests and learning styles proving a rather difficult focus on who the target learners are.

The key step towards an autonomous classroom was to erode the traditional, i.e., prevalingly frontal and by definition teacher-centric, textbook-based and grammar-focused method of instruction by introducing both in-class and computer-assisted OIE activities which often encouraged the students to work with their online partners



asynchronously. Importantly, during the asynchronous part of OIEs, students were forced to work outside the class and more or less independently to meet certain goals, e.g., conduct several online meetings with their peers, co-create a video, etc. It was up to them to arrange when and how to connect with their partners and decide whether or not to report back to the teacher and/or ask for guidance; such activities therefore put a much greater emphasis on the *managerial* or *technical* aspect of learner autonomy (Sudhershana 19-20) as it was the students' responsibility to monitor and manage the learning process.

The rationale behind this step was to erode monologic and thus monotonous in-class experience by introducing "active learning activities" based on student dialogue and negotiation of meaning. In line with these considerations, all OIE activities, in which students were navigated into semi-natural interaction with other students, shared the assumption that "the autonomy classroom deliberately exploits the dialogic nature of language in its emphasis on the interactive, interdependent nature of language, language learning, and language use" (Little, "Learner Autonomy" 51).

The effectiveness of the implementation process was assessed through student surveys. In 2017, a research survey among 153 students of 2nd year BSc programmes comparing different types of OIE modules proved that students favour activities which they perceive as business-related and developing skills relevant to their future job opportunities (Štefl, "Innovating" 101). The relevance of a real-life business-related context in OIEs was analysed in another survey focusing on an asymmetric OIE in a Business Networking course (Štefl, "Exchange" 95) and the English for Intercultural Communication Course (Hřebačková). Besides showing that the students perceived OIEs as different, entertaining, interactive and motivating as well as beneficial in terms of developing their real-life networking skills, the survey also foreshadowed a number of issues related to student autonomy. Speaking about the challenges related to OIEs, students mentioned barriers pertaining to communication including their partners' unwillingness to meet deadlines and a lack of formality (Štefl, "Exchange" 95). Focus group discussions revealed the need for teacher guidance as students often considered the outcomes of OIEs unpredictable and needed continuous confirmation from the teacher. The perception and role of OIEs in many ways changed with the need to move to online teaching in response to the pandemic.

While pre-pandemic OIEs can be seen as individual activities of project team innovators, a massive institutional shift to online education bridged the imperative for online support with the objections at the departmental and institutional level. The OIEs complemented with a methodological guidelines became a welcome change breaking monotonous lines of monologic presentations, bringing to class new quality of digital collaborative approaches and interuniversity interactions, and improving the effectiveness of pedagogies. On the other hand, the overall number of hours spent online abruptly increased, which touched on new fears such as concerns of mental health of both students and teachers.

At this point, the students were going through a period of confusion as a result of the rapid change in their overall learning environment. Many started to value physical



interaction and space and the emergency remote study has led to a reassessment of the social dimensions of the work, which can be understood as “the degree to which the work required dealing with other people, and the amount of feedback received from others” (Oldham & Hackman 467). In the in-class setting, students and teachers develop relationships and influence each other through behaviours, cognitions and emotions. Even if students are unwilling to provide personal verbal feedback to the teachers, there is always some form of nonverbal reciprocity; for example, teachers observe students’ behaviour or emotions such as boredom or excitement and this is an important form of feedback.

This observation might be seen as a vital aspect of the management and structured teaching process (Bennett and Barp; Kulikowski *et al.*). Importantly, forced e-learning may in this respect decrease both teacher’s and learner’s autonomy in selecting methods of work and decision making (Kulikowski), which in the long run, may change the motivational potential of a given job, and introduce the need for a new variety of different transversal skills to be trained. How much the most sought-after skills may change became clear thanks to The World Economic Forum in 2020 (World Economic Forum) which drew attention especially to the top skills and skill groups which employers see as rising in prominence. In the lead up to 2025, these include critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility.

Therefore, the next step for the sustainable future of HE is to closely follow and consider the transformation of the business world and offer multiple and diverse pathways to learn the content, be it partly a face-to-face engagement, synchronous or asynchronous OIEs, pre-recorded video presentations, artificial intelligence or rather a mixture fitting most learning and teaching styles. However, we also believe that preparing students to succeed in online working environments with a good level of productivity and self-management is likely to stay and may function as a stimulus for creating stronger global virtual education programmes.

DEMOCRATIZING ASSESSMENT: PORTFOLIOS

The need to innovate assessment methods and move away from the one summative test-based assessment at the end of the given term towards alternative forms of assessment which would promise to encourage student participation predates the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet it was only with the forced transfer to distance learning when it was finally in early 2020 implemented into the BE curriculum.

Before this change, each term of the four-term course of BE was concluded with a rather traditional 90-minute, multiple-choice in-class test focusing on grammar, listening and reading comprehension and vocabulary covered in the course textbook which is a traditional scheme students are familiar with and used to from primary and secondary education. The final BE test allowed for one resit with the exception of the final, fourth term when two resits became a possibility. From both constructivist and



learner autonomy perspective, its key limitation is that it represents an exclusively summative type of assessment which encourages neither an active nor autonomous approach in students. This means that besides in-class feedback throughout the term, students receive only limited standardised formative feedback, typically a grade or score, and are insufficiently encouraged to work systematically throughout the term and incentivised to work with and learn from their mistakes. An assessment model which allows students to reflect on their performance only at the end of the term and in most cases only if they fail the final test encourages and/or reinforces negative learning habits—including monotony—and impedes the quality of reflection and student learning in general.

Departing from a constructivist approach to assessment which accentuates formative rather than summative assessment (IQST) and encourages social co-construction of knowledge through peer and self-assessment (McGarrigle 2), we decided to respond by replacing the test with a modular, semi-autonomous product portfolio assessing all four language skills. The reasons for this change were both pedagogic and pragmatic. Assessment portfolios collecting “selected information on teaching activities and solid evidence of their effectiveness” (qtd. in Kaplan 1) are a generally accepted method of both formative and summative assessment which allows for “a systematic and selective collection of student work” demonstrating “the student’s motivation, academic growth, and level of achievement”; at the same time learning portfolios are a widely accepted tool for developing learner autonomy (Duang and Seepho 44). Thanks to this, portfolios provide students with “an opportunity [...] to monitor their own writing progress and take responsibility for meeting goals” (Mokhtaria 171) over a given time period. Consequently, students are discouraged from studying excessively to prepare for one end-of-the-term test which alone determines their grade. Adopting a gradualist approach, different versions of portfolios, each with an increased complexity, were later introduced into BE curricula in 2021. The pedagogic rationale behind this approach was to lead students into making informed and guided decisions about their assessment.

The portfolio introduced in the first semester of online learning during the Covid pandemic consisted of the following segments: (1) a formative Revision Activity (a set of Moodle tasks including listening tasks which the students were to complete within one month with a minimum score of 80%), (2) a semi-autonomous Glossary (a student-created vocabulary list of 30 course-related vocabulary items with definitions), (3) formative Grammar Activity (a set of exercises available on the Moodle course page which the students were to complete within one month with the minimum score of 80%), (4) Written Component (200-250 words responding to one of four given questions), (5) Video Presentation (a video presentation including at least 5 slides, i.e., 5-8 minutes, submitted as a video recording including a voice-over) summarising the content of one of the texts students were asked to read during the term, and finally (6) a standard, timed Moodle test assessing covered grammar and vocabulary.

The rationale behind this portfolio was that most activities either encouraged students to work over a longer period of time and gradually improve (segments 1 and



3) or offered a variety of topics/questions to choose from (4 and 5). At the same time, the portfolio allowed the students to skip selected segments of the portfolio in exchange for a lower final grade, meaning that portfolios were assessed based on the number of completed sections. More specifically, in order to score an “A”, all six sections had to be submitted, a “B” required five sections and so on; in order to pass with the lowest grade possible —“E”—it was enough for the students to submit two sections. Students were assessed on the ECTS six grade scale of A to F.

The analysis of submitted portfolios revealed that the ratio of grades received by students (2nd-year Business English Students, n=152) who submitted the portfolio was the following: out of 152 students, there were 29 As, 34 Bs, 26 Cs, 11 Ds and 5 Es; there were 47 students who either chose not to submit a portfolio at all or whose work did not meet the required standard. The discussions with students during the explanatory phase when the structure of the portfolio, instructions, and assessment criteria were explained, and later during focus groups sessions at the end of the term indicate the following.

The assessment portfolio met with a stern resistance of high achievers who preferred traditional tests at the end of the term because portfolios, unlike the tests, did not allow them to, as one of the best students put it: “simply come to the class, take the test, most likely pass with an ok score”. For these students to achieve a good score, portfolios suddenly required more work over a longer period of time. This *economising* aspect of learner autonomy can be related to four traditional perspectives learner autonomy, i.e., the technical, psychological, socio-cultural, and political-critical (qtd. in Sudhershnan 10–18), and appears as a blend of technical autonomy, which allows students to effectively manage the learning process by making choices towards efficient learning and meeting study goals, students’ psychological and metacognitive skills, as well as, perhaps, their socio-cultural setting which, in this case, represents any elements that determine how much time the student can and is willing to invest into their learning. This economising aspect of learner autonomy might be also seen as a sign of the absence of internalisation of learning goals, or, simply as a coping mechanism which allows students to manage demanding university studies. In other words, students *economise* their decisions to pass the class with an optimal—i.e., the lowest required—amount of effort in a situation in which they do not take the particular course *to learn something* but, in the first place, *to pass it*. At the same time, it is a proof of students’ acute awareness of and ability to reflect on the learning process.

On the other hand, the portfolio was generally accepted well by low achievers who appreciated the fact that they do not have to worry about passing or failing one test and can reach scores they would have never achieved in a traditional test. Focus group discussions thereby revealed that students are well aware of their learning strategies and preferences which informed their decision regarding what grade to aim at, confirming a solid level of learner autonomy, especially when considering technological and psychological perspectives, and advanced learning strategies, i.e., “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford 8).



Referring to the question of *economising*, students explained that some of their choices were motivated not only by the desire to achieve a better grade but also by the perceived efficiency of individual tasks, time pressure related to other exams, their working careers, personal problems or preferences, etc. For example, a number of students openly declared that they did not attempt to score an A because this would require shooting a video presentation which they did not find efficient or comfortable doing.

Based on these results, we decided to take a step towards a strong approach to learner autonomy which already assumes some degree of autonomy in students and implemented modified versions of the portfolio-based assessment in all four terms of the BE curriculum. We chose to retain the flexibility of choice on the level of individual segments—for instance in the segment focusing on writing, students could choose from four possible topics. At the same time, we decided to drop the possibility to submit only selected parts of the portfolio as previously this had allowed students to avoid assessment of specific skills as, for example, students who felt weak in speaking chose not to submit their Video Presentation component because this would mean “too much work on a challenging task for a limited reward”. This on the one hand clearly showed students’ awareness and ability to reflect on their learning and *economise* their learning strategies, but, on the other hand, proved them unable to assume the necessary responsibility for their learning by choosing the path of least resistance instead of focusing on areas which need urgent agreement. In other words, students proved autonomous enough from the psychological and technical perspective (Oxford, 2003, 2015; Sudhershnan, 2012), which allows them to reflect on their learning strategies, yet, at the same time, were not autonomous to a degree that they would set *pedagogically* correct goals, i.e., motivating themselves not to take the most *economising* approach to assessment at the expense of quality.

In order to incorporate elements of formative assessment into the portfolios and introduce continuous assessment throughout the term, each segment of the new formative portfolio, with the exception of the final test, underwent three rounds of formative assessment; these included self-assessment, peer assessment, and finally assessment done by the teacher. This step was partially motivated by the OECD 2020 Report which, in the context of the Czech system of education, points out a lack of attention in the area of system evaluation and shows that students perceived the level of teacher formative feedback on their learning to be among the lowest in the OECD. Only once feedback from all parts of the portfolio has been integrated into the final product could the task be submitted. In the academic year 2021/2022, the 2nd-year Business English formative portfolio consisted of the following components: (1) A Solo Presentation, (2) Team Presentation, (3) Written Component, (4) a student-created Business Terminology List, and (5) a final Test.

The analysis of submitted portfolios revealed the following ratio of grades received by the students (2nd year Business English Students, n=67): out of 67 students, there were 2 As, 20 Bs, 30 Cs, 9 Ds and 4 Es; there were only 2 students who either chose not to submit a portfolio at all or whose work did not meet the required standard.



Despite limitations of the comparison, the analysis of the final grades of the summative portfolio in 2020 and the formative portfolios used in 2021 revealed that the formative portfolio model resulted in a significantly lower number of dropouts, i.e., 3% in 2021 in comparison to 31% in 2020. Although this can be attributed to other factors (e.g., results in other subjects), the difference seems significant. At the same time, there appears to be an increase in the overall percentage of Bs (an increase from 22% to 30%) and Cs (an increase from 17% to 45%). However, the overall improvement in the final grade, which might be expected in a formative portfolio given the amount of feedback students were given, did not meet our expectations. The obvious explanation might be the final test in which students achieved an average of 59% while in the rest of the portfolio tasks they scored an average of 77%; the highest overall scores were achieved in the Business Terminology List (90.5%); average scores for the Written Component were 72%, for Team Presentation 67.7% and for Solo Presentation 68.7%.

Continuous assessment through formative portfolios met with a mixed student response. A questionnaire-based survey among the involved students revealed that 46% of the respondents fully or partially agree with the statement "I find the portfolio to be an effective method to test students in my English class"; when asked if they would prefer "one longer, pass-or-fail test at the end of the course instead of completing the portfolio", 53% answered yes. On the plus side, 84% of the respondents either agreed or fully agreed with the statement: "In my English class, I use my teacher's feedback to improve my work." Students' critical comments can be summed up in the following note in which one of the students described the portfolio as: "Time consuming, very restrictive instructions that you have to follow, don't see any benefits or improvements."

This and similar comments highlight the need to allocate more time to carefully explain curricular and course design, and assessment goals and pedagogically communicate the steps of the autonomous learning process with students, especially with those whose language proficiency would allow them to benefit from traditional forms of instruction and assessment.

DISCUSSION

Longer exposure to continuous formative assessment and even more explaining done by the teachers would probably result in students' realisation that their tendency to economise assessment, i.e., to appreciate courses that can be passed with a minimum effort, will not pay off in the long run. Overall, the implementation of formative portfolios did not result in a dramatic improvement of students' final scores but led to a smaller number of dropouts, allowed for more systematic work with error and encouraged students to assume more responsibility for their work by emphasising reflection and learner autonomy, and as such it seemed to have been a step in the right direction, pedagogically speaking. However, based on our experience it seems safe to conclude that alternative forms of assessment alone do not seem to guarantee an automatic increase in student engagement and lead to student autonomy, especially



within the framework of digital learning, and has to be accompanied by and coordinated with other changes.

Our experience with the shift towards constructivist pedagogies indicates that the push towards a more relevant, student-centric course content and alternative assessment forms in HE foreign language courses needs to go hand in hand with personalised learning (Nandigam *et al.* 2014) in terms of both course content and assessment, possibly towards models based on coaching-oriented language teaching as foreshadowed in the works of Curran (1976) and Kovács (2019) and as now explored as part of CORALL project ("About the project"). The biggest advantage of these models resides exactly in the possibility to individualise the teacher's approach and find a well-balanced interdependency between students' needs and interests, teachers' pedagogic aims, and institutional requirements which would fit all types of learners. The challenge remains how to incorporate such solutions into often rigid academic settings.

Saying that educators should not perceive the forced shift to online teaching caused by the Covid pandemic as a problem but rather as an opportunity to rethink our existing practices has become a bit of a cliché, but if the prevalent tendency in digital learning is and has been towards interactivity, personalised content, and microlearning, then it is possible to retort that learning technologies in fact only highlight our existing pedagogical practices and in case of transmissive pedagogies, exacerbate their negative effect which predates the advent of the Covid era and which include monologism, monotony and a resulting lack of engagement and autonomy.

CONCLUSION: AUTONOMY, MONOTONY, ECONOMY

Referring back to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, Sudhersan in her thesis clearly points out the paradoxical nature of learner autonomy (15), as an interactive process, which is closely related to the fact that it is "characterized not by independence but by *interdependence*" (qtd. in Sudhersan 16) and argues that "in this perspective [...] autonomy is understood as self-regulation that is an outcome of social interactions with more competent individuals (or tools)" (Sudhersan 16).

Our experience confirms that this paradox becomes manifest in the individual nature of this *interdependence* which is grounded in the relationship of the teacher and each student and their individual needs. Recent development in the field of language teaching made it clear that for university language education it is impossible to ignore pedagogies which aim towards emancipating the curricula from monotony resulting from the perpetuation of traditional transmissive pedagogies that do not directly consider students and their needs, regardless of the fact whether they are dictated by their internal motivation or demands of the job market. At the same time, it is evident that university students are not a homogeneous group and must not be treated as one, especially when it comes to innovating curricula towards autonomy. Some students are more attuned towards making their own choices than others and any curricular reform needs to respect this fact. Should a student conclude that the actual development level



as determined by their independent problem solving is greater (or equal) to the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (qtd. in Sudharsan 15), their interest in the course drops below boring; this opens the gap for economising autonomy. The other part of the equation then is the teacher who, equipped with necessary diagnostic and helping tools, allows for the autonomous *interdependence* to take place.

In the ongoing transformation of language teaching at the UCT School of Business we departed from the idea of fostering autonomy through leading students into pedagogically *safe* situations in which they could make informed choices about their study to situations which require a larger degree of autonomy. Reflecting on our experience so far, it seems clear that even in the case of high achievers and their tendency towards economising their autonomy, the *interdependent* nature of learner autonomy plays a crucial role, especially in autonomy-heavy realms of digital learning; the adoption of language counselling tools appears to be another natural step towards cultivating this *interdependence*. In this sense, the adoption of more personalised learning practices and alternative assessment seems to have been a correct step. The journey continues.

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