

## Learner Autonomy from the Teacher's Perspective

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**Abstract.** The development of autonomy in language learning is not a goal in itself nowadays but a major support to the development of language use. This aspect encourages a shift in approaches to foreign language teaching away from "traditional" to ones focusing on collaborative partnership between teachers and learners. Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e. conscious reflection and decision making. The autonomy-driven learning process facilitates the formation of a learning community. Setting up an autonomous learning environment which is neither teacher centered or directed, nor learner centered or directed, but learning centered and directed puts certain demands on teachers as well as learners. One of the most important issues becomes metacognitive awareness, which incorporates language awareness, cognitive awareness, social awareness and cultural awareness. All these involve the development of positive attitudes, self-awareness and self-confidence, which are essential to the development of a foreign language. The issue of learner autonomy is surveyed from the perspective of teaching composition writing at secondary level in Lithuania. The article presents a survey of the research, based on the aspect of autonomous learning during the process of foreign language composition writing.

### Introduction

Recently, the concept of learner-teacher autonomy has become an important issue in the process of foreign language acquisition. A concern with the nature of learning and autonomy has become well established in EFL methodology. Nowadays, the learner autonomy is being promoted far more widely than it has ever been. It has become obvious that learner autonomy development has to be accepted as an important general educational goal. With the changing needs of the society, the question of teacher's autonomy becomes equally important in foreign language teaching.

The use of the English language has become more significant due to the social and political changes in Lithuania over the past decade. Thus, the need to learn the language has increased. This attitude comprises not only speaking, reading, and listening but also writing various sorts of documentation because much information is being transmitted in a written form. It has become educationally relevant for senior students in Lithuanian high schools to acquire the ability to write compositions in English, constructing their ideas in a sequential and directed manner. In reviewing the situation that has developed, the fact was noticed that adequate changes in the content of general education at schools had to be foreseen.

Teaching/learning composition writing needs to be more effective; the process of teaching and learning has to be individualized and differentiated. Transposition of practices, which students have acquired by writing compositions in their native language, has become especially relevant.

Writing of compositions in a foreign language is one of the composite areas of foreign language teaching. In Lithuania, numerous scholars have researched foreign language issues, related to the teaching of foreign languages.

Significant studies in teaching languages include the works of Lithuanian experts, such as Vytautas Šernas, an originator of academic field of glottoeducology (1994; 2001; 2002), A.Jacikevičius in multilingualism (1970; 1986), V.Januškevičius in psycholinguistics (1972; 1981), L.Valeika (1985; 1998), and others. Much research has been done abroad in analyzing methodological issues of written English (Conlin, 1975; Flower, 1985; Hall, 1988; Pearsall, 1988; Gould, 1989; Murray, 1990; Shaneen, 1998; Warner, 2001; and Collins, 2000).

It can be asserted that much attention is paid to teaching/learning foreign language composition writing in other countries; however, the development of fundamentals gained from native language practices, and the major skills that have to be acquired during foreign language classes are aspects that have been rather narrowly analyzed so far. Different studies in other countries have been focused on composition writing as a second language study, often analyzing only the relationship between English and some other language (not Lithuanian). Frequently, such studies fail to address the issue of philological and cultural practices of a student. Composition writing in English by senior students in Lithuanian General Education schools has not been thoroughly investigated. In Lithuania, capability in writing English compositions has been tested rather inconsistently without considering specific features of teaching/learning English composition writing or the present-day needs, based on learner autonomy development.

**The problem of the research.** The existing concept of teaching composition writing in English in Lithuanian General Education secondary schools is directed towards general aims of teaching English as a foreign language, ignoring the individual experience of learning the native language or other foreign languages and the development of learner autonomy. The present contradictions in this

teaching/learning process make it inadequate to psychological and linguistic needs of high school students in Lithuania. For this reason, it is necessary to define the new perspectives of learner development adequate to the national needs.

**Research hypothesis.** The quality of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing depends on learner autonomy development, oriented towards the strategic and tactical interaction of external and internal factors, when seeking accord in the content and form of composition and learner autonomy.

**The object of the research** is teaching/learning foreign language composition writing at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade level in General Education schools in Lithuania, and improvement thereof under the conditions of multilingualism.

**The aim of the research.** This study was designed to investigate learner autonomy development through the practice of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing in Lithuania.

The actualization of the research was carried out by pursuing the following **objectives**:

1. Statistically substantiate the relevance of issues in teaching/learning foreign language composition writing by investigating the situation thereof in Lithuania, as well as the major difficulties and needs for the development of self-learning techniques.
2. Review some practices in aspects of learner autonomy development in teaching/learning foreign language composition writing.
3. Investigate the paradigm of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing, which is oriented towards an effective interaction between internal and external factors, including learner autonomy development, and statistically substantiate the hypothesis.

**Methods applied for resolving research objectives** were the following: an analysis of the sources in pedagogy and glottoeducology, psychology, and philosophy; a document analysis; a questionnaire survey; an experiment in training; and a statistical data analysis.

The prevailing communicative teaching trend directs the teaching process towards a student's preparation for the authentic communication at four communicational levels. These four levels subsume a student's ability to listen, to speak, to read and to write, i.e. these levels encompass the development of communicative competence. However, the socio-cultural competence and the linguistic competence should also be developed at the same time. Lithuanian international policy, economic situation, problems related to Euro-integration, personal needs and certain means of communication operating around the world determine a new outlook on teaching foreign language composition writing. These reasons have served as the basis for a critical evaluation of high school students' involvement in a special type of linguistic activities, writing compositions. When students finish schools or gymnasiums, they are often incompetent to express their ideas correctly in a

written form in a foreign language, they cannot perceive stylistic differences nor are acquainted with different types of foreign language compositions, and cannot apply their knowledge of the native language because they have not acquired linguistic (polylinguistic) competence. To ensure successful foreign language learning, the main objective should be attained: people's thinking skills should be systematically developed in order to create a link between thoughts and a language as a means of expression (Šernas, 2002). At present, teaching/learning foreign language composition writing has become significant at secondary schools in Lithuania schools because other linguistic skills (speaking, listening, and reading) are developed and maintained through writing. While writing compositions, students learn how to express their ideas logically. This process makes students more creative, more accurate and more dutiful. Teaching foreign language composition writing has always been understood as a process consisting of numerous stages and encompassing different aspects of language development. As a training activity, teaching/learning foreign language composition writing is very complex. Thus, the research included the examination of the needs and provisions of the students at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade level in General Education schools and the analysis of instructional compositions. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade level has been chosen for this research in order to evaluate the possible effective methods implemented in the process of teaching composition writing and to foresee the improvement of the preparatory process for the State Examination. This research is oriented towards the logical and consistent expression of ideas in written English and the analysis of writing skills, and their change on the basis of fostering learner autonomy.

Teaching/learning foreign language composition writing is analyzed from the perspective of learner autonomy development; the above-mentioned aspects of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing and the versatility of this process are taken into consideration. Compositions are considered to make one of the main parts of the process of language training. Indeed, a composition is the result of a student's linguistic activity; it serves as a proof of the students' ability to express their ideas or emotions and create images. During the process of writing a composition a student's level of intelligence, his/her feelings and intellectual capabilities are displayed. While writing a composition, a student also learns to evaluate or think about literary phenomena as well as the problems of everyday life.

Learner autonomy can be defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning, to have and to hold the responsibility for the decisions concerning all the aspects of this learning (Sinclair, 2001). It has been stated that learner autonomy includes determining the objectives, defining, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, evaluating what has been acquired (Sinclair, 2001). The capacities that make up behavioral autonomy can be developed only experientially, that is, through practice. It is impossible to become an autonomous language learner simply by being told how to do it. Being told how to be an autonomous language learner provides the learner with useful

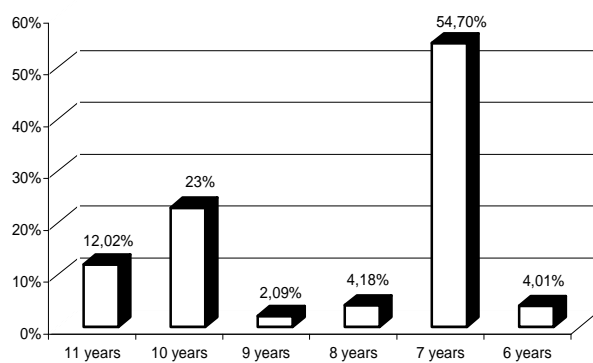
information and insights. However, the language learner will become gradually more autonomous only through the practice of autonomy. Therefore, the central goal of pedagogy oriented to learner autonomy development must be to equip learners with a capacity to use and learn their target language beyond the physical and temporal limits of their immediate learning environment. The teacher's duty becomes to engage students in the process of learning and using the target language. The students must discover reasons for learning and using their target language in the classroom on the basis of learner autonomy development (*Common European Framework*, 2002). Those reasons will necessarily involve them in collaborative activities, for language learning is rooted in social-interactive process.

The research of written English at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade level has been grounded on the importance of compositions in the educational process and the present situation, which was determined as inadequate to international needs. The aim of this study was to define students' written English, to foresee the future of foreign language teaching/learning and make this process more effective by evaluating different tendencies of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing, new educational concepts and different attitudes. One of the goals of this study was to give an evaluation of the present situation and prepare a special training program for teaching/learning foreign language composition writing.

## Results and Discussion

A research group (2000-2003) consisted of student participants at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade level in Lithuanian secondary schools. Lithuanian regions and cities in which this research was performed were Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Panevėžys and its district, Šiauliai, Kėdainiai, Alytus, Raseiniai, Utena. The number of participants was 574. 276 of the participants were in humanities and 298 in realistic profile classes, 349 girls and 225 boys.

It was determined that the majority of students started learning English at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade level – 54.7% (Fig. 1). Apart from the English language, the majority of pupils study Russian as a second foreign language (55.5%) (Fig. 2).

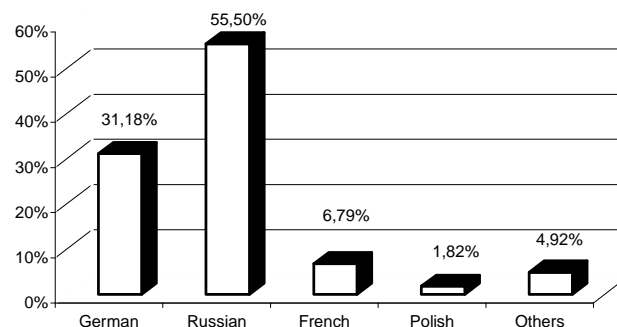


**Figure 1.** Duration of studying English in the test group

The questionnaire survey indicated that compositions are rarely written in English, and the frequency of their writing

differs. In indicating the reasons for the insufficient quality of English compositions, students mentioned several important aspects, such as the insufficient knowledge of grammar (60.98%), the infrequent writing of compositions (33.8%), the absence of error analysis (36.3%).

Students perceive the quality of their compositions written in English as poor and think that their compositions written in the native language (Lithuanian) are of much better quality. Low evaluation of compositions written in English demonstrates gaps in the educational process as well as discrepancies between the foreign language teaching programs and the real situation.



**Figure 2.** Studying other languages in the test group

The survey results showed that students preferred writing English compositions on a topic of their own choice (54.88%), and writing short compositions (27.18%). Students expressed a favorable attitude, regarding teaching/learning foreign language composition writing: 56% believe that the acquired knowledge will be useful in the future. Survey results indicate that teaching foreign language composition writing does not receive enough attention: error analysis is often not taken into account; teachers' input is ineffective; basic principles of learner autonomy are not applied in practice. Teachers explain the absence of composition writing activities as preparation for other tasks of the examination. Consequently, students do few exercises of composition writing. Pre-writing activities are often omitted altogether. 67 teachers participated in the questionnaire survey. Merely 46% of them use exercises that help students to prepare for composition writing (often these exercises are applied to teach grammar only); 4% make use of the possibilities provided by uncontrolled composition writing, 83% use neither pre-writing exercises nor tasks to generate ideas. Some teachers explain this situation as the lack of class-work time. Others give preference to other spheres of foreign language teaching.

The fact was determined that students understand the necessity of improving writing skills and point out drawbacks related to this process. In this aspect, the students of the humanities and the students of the realistic profile demonstrated similar understanding of the possibilities to improve foreign language composition writing.

The survey data indicate that most students lack skills of written English. Compositions are not written regularly and systematically. The process of teaching/learning

foreign language composition writing is usually based on the fragmental performance of tasks. It neither stimulates logical thinking nor evaluates the juxtaposition of linguistic phenomena. The issue of learner autonomy is totally ignored. Such a situation fails to meet the standards set in the teaching programs for Lithuanian secondary schools.

The fact was discovered that the significance of the teaching/learning of foreign language composition writing is conditioned by internal and external factors. Changes concerning the usage of the English language in our country can be attributed to external factors. Since great attention is paid to the projection of an individual's functions in a contemporary society, written forms of business communication have become very popular nowadays. Teaching/learning foreign language composition writing as an integral part of the development of foreign language writing skills is particularly important to a student's further studies, career and participation in social situations. Students' preparation to write compositions, their ability to make use of the philological experience and ability to plan their activity can be attributed to the internal factors. At present, strict requirements and high standards included into the foreign language teaching programs do not correspond with the students' abilities to write compositions in a foreign language. The students are unprepared to meet these standards in reality. Therefore, all requirements should be re-assessed and acceptable ways of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing should be determined.

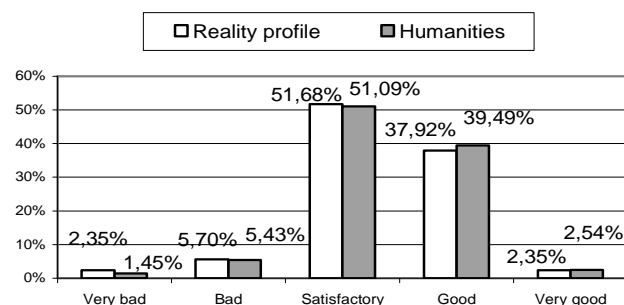
While comparing the preferences with respect to the activity, only 3.83% of students indicated composition writing in class as a top priority. The lack of instructional composition writing implementation in the process of teaching/learning foreign language is evident. The answers of students studying different second languages reveal statistically reliable similarity ( $p>0.05$ ). In the groups of learners of different sex groups a different approach to the writing work done at school and at home was noticed. Statistically reliable ( $p<0.05$ ) difference of writing at home preference occurred between the girls' and boys' groups: 61.03% of girls and 46.67% of boys enjoy this type of work. No difference was observed in the approach to composition writing in class ( $p>0.05$ ). As statistically reliable, a positive viewpoint prevails with respect to the supplementary reading in English. Negative approach to composition writing at school demonstrates gaps in teaching/learning process.

Students are able to discuss the basic needs for learning foreign language composition writing: they state which specific knowledge they lack (grammar — 69.19%, vocabulary — 85.19%; logical presentation of thoughts — 38.85%; composition structure — 63.07%). Students highlight the factor of insufficient error analysis and inadequate training activities, and are able to evaluate their compositions realistically (Fig.3). Students point out the following major causes for the low quality of compositions: insufficient amount of grammar knowledge,

infrequent writing tasks both in the reality profile and humanities classes, and inadequate error analysis.

While analyzing the answers in relation to the places of residence, it was observed that composition writing frequency is different. Diverse frequency indicates differences in teaching/learning process. The following statistically reliable differences among the answers of various city groups were determined: Kaunas - Panevėžys ( $p<0.05$ ); Kaunas - Vilnius ( $p<0.001$ ); Kaunas - Raseiniai ( $p<0.005$ ).

Major gaps in the process of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing have formed due to the absence of the unified system of methodological means, and incongruity between teaching programs, teaching standards and applied teaching/learning means. One of the most important reasons for such a situation is the disregard of interaction between internal and external factors in the educational process and the disregard of learner autonomy development.



**Figure 3.** The quality of compositions in English in different learning profile groups

Survey results formed the conditions for designing the experiment in training. Two groups were chosen for the research: the test group (32 students, 105 compositions) and the control group (30 students, 98 compositions) in Kaunas J.Basanavičius Secondary School, Kaunas K.Grinius Secondary School and Raseiniai "Šaltinis" Secondary School. Two subgroups were chosen in each school: the control group (writing each time without any separate preparation) and the test group (writing according to R1, R2, R3, R4 programs). The obtained results were compared and evaluated. The independent variables (means of influence) were as follows: a teaching source, formed on the fundamental aspects of learner autonomy development, which encompassed an instrument for vocabulary-building, reinforcement of grammatical structures, principles for composition structure, practice for generating ideas, and self-study means. The purpose was to define the effect of the composition teaching program. The dependent variables were the compositions — the production of students' writing activities. Compositions of the test group were evaluated prior to and after applying the influencers. The comparison of results between primary and secondary influencers was performed for the test group.

Prior to applying the first influencer, students wrote a composition on the given topic of "Education in Lithuania"

without preparation. Their compositions were assessed by the *analytical evaluation method* (areas selected for assessment, i.e. the parameters, were *content*, *structure*, *language* and *grammar*). The assessment of compositions consisted of application of conditional points. Compositions were assessed by the same criteria during the pre- and post-effect of each influencer. The control and test groups wrote three compositions: at the beginning (R1), during the course (R2), and at the end of the investigation (R3). A subgroup of the students in the test group repeated the writing of a composition (R4) after a lapse of three months. The purpose of this was to explain the level of assimilation and retention of information, and the level of acquired knowledge.

The influencers were the following: generating pre-writing activities in groups and pairs, analysis of the questions, related to the structure of the composition and grammatical aspects necessary for composition writing on the given topic, self-analysis of mistakes in the first composition, the in-group revision of separate parts of the composition and the search for additional informational sources (in English and Lithuanian) on the Internet. The influencers were conditioned by the internal factors: learners' self-evaluation, self-criticism, additional grammatical information and ways of expression, and the use of more diverse sources. Related to the external factors was interaction in groups and pair-work: error analysis (teacher-student input, use of informational sources). It was observed that external factors initiated especially favorable motivation in the process of writing further compositions.

SPSS 11.0 version was applied to process the results. The calculations were performed using *Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*, *Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test* and *Mann-Whitney Test* (Čekanavičius, Murauskas, 2001, 2002). Results of the test and control groups were compared prior to the experiment, during its course, and at the end. Results within the test group were also compared prior to the experiment, during its course, and at the end, and results within the control group — at the beginning, during the course and at the end of the experiment. Changes in composition writing abilities of members in the test and control groups were assessed prior to the experiment, during its course, and at the end. Composition writing abilities in the test and control groups were analyzed and results were summarized at different measurement levels. Effectiveness of the experimental influencers was determined. Finally, error dynamics in the control and test groups during the course of the investigation was defined. In reviewing the results of changes, an assumption can be made that the applied experimental method caused positive changes. Retention of acquired abilities was assessed, and the possibility of their constant regeneration was discerned.

The comparison of the results of the two groups indicates a considerable change in the quality of the test group compositions: content ( $p < 0.001$ ), structure ( $p < 0.001$ ), language ( $p < 0.001$ ), and grammar ( $p < 0.01$ ). The significance of the two influencers (primary and secondary) in the test group was defined while comparing the results of the test and control groups.

R4, the fourth testing program (composition), was applied in order to check the level of knowledge retention when writing a composition on the same topic after the lapse of three months. This testing was applied specifically for one test sub-group while projecting the further research.

The results indicate that, in most of the cases, at the beginning of the research (R1) the control group showed better results than the test group (Fig. 4 and 5), even though there was not any additional preparation applied. However, after R2, when the test group received special influence, the results changed: the results in the control group were the same, whereas the compositions of the test group demonstrated better results.

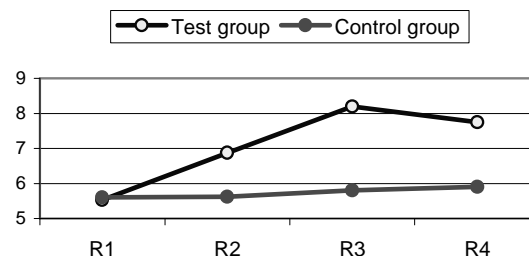


Figure 4. Comparison of results

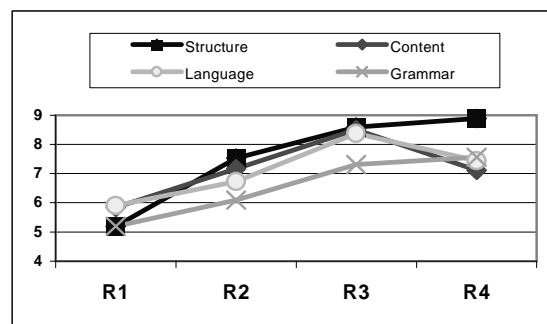


Figure 5. Change of results in the test group

The evaluation of the change of distinct criterion results indicates that the highest progress during R2 was achieved in “structure” criterion (it increased by 2.34 points), the smallest progress was determined in “language” criterion (0.81 point). The reverse situation occurred in R3, where the most distinct progress was attained in “language” (1.66 points), the smallest deviation was noticed in the change of “structure” (1.06 points). “Structure” and “grammar” criteria increased just by 0.3 and 0.25 points, while “content” and “language” decreased by 1.39 point and 0.94 point respectively. A conclusion can be drawn that the expansion of vocabulary and topic cannot be achieved in a short period of time. The acquired knowledge and skills have to be constantly maintained and strengthened.

The obtained results in the change of “content” were the following: (R2)  $z = |-4.63| > 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; (R3)  $z = |-4.9| > 3.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The results of evaluation of the change in “structure” in the compositions of the test group demonstrate positive changes. The determined significant differences are the following: (R2) “structure” ( $z = |-$

4.61|>3.00;  $p<0.001$ ); (R3)  $z=|-5.01|>3.00$ ;  $p<0.001$ . The evaluation of the change of “*language*” in the compositions of the test group reveals positive changes: statistically significant differences were determined in (R2)  $z=|-4.81|>3.00$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; (R3)  $z=|-4.90|>3.00$ ,  $p<0.001$ . The results of evaluation of the change in “*grammar*” in the compositions of the test group indicate statistically significant differences: (R2) -  $z=|-4.56|>3.00$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; (R3)  $z=|-4.97|>3.00$ ,  $p<0.001$ .

Results initiate a conclusion that R2 and R3 methods applied to the test group are significant. Composition evaluation results demonstrate the positive change in learners’ skills. Changes in the quality of the control group compositions are statistically insignificant; however, these changes are important from the educational point of view.

Significant changes were observed after the primary and secondary influencers in the test group: content ( $p<0.001$ ), grammar ( $p<0.001$ ), structure ( $p<0.001$ ), language ( $p<0.001$ ). The observed high increase in the quality of structure may be explained by the retention of the theoretical knowledge. The positive changes in the compositions of the test group during the experiment proved the effectiveness of the applied method, based on the development of learner autonomy.

## Conclusions

Different qualitative and quantitative methods were combined, while conducting the research during its stages. Issues related to the Lithuanian educational reform, educational strategies, European Commission decisions and norms have been discussed and analyzed to determine the strategies for developing composition writing in a foreign language in Lithuania.

The survey questionnaire method enabled the evaluation of the present-day situation of teaching/learning composition writing in English in Lithuania, and made it possible to determine the needs of the learners. The fact was disclosed that teaching/learning foreign language composition writing was inefficient in Lithuanian schools. The unified system of teaching compositions in English does not exist and the acquired skills are superficial. The results of learners’ self-observation reveal the disregard of the interaction between the internal and external factors in the process of teaching/learning foreign language composition writing. The necessity of initiating changes in the educational process has been determined and grounded.

The survey questionnaire results enabled the preparation for the experiment, the aim of which was to empirically substantiate the interaction of internal and external factors and the necessity for learner autonomy development. SPSS (Statistical Program for Social Sciences) data analysis package (11.0) was applied to analyze and describe the results. Treated as the basis, the highlighted conceptual attitudes were determined, while projecting the model of the research logical structure necessary for the analysis of the research data.

The following investigations were accomplished during the research:

- The evaluation of the change of the test and control groups was defined (“*content*” ( $p<0.001$ ), “*structure*” ( $p<0.001$ ), “*language*” ( $p<0.001$ ), “*grammar*” ( $p<0.01$ ))
- Composition writing skills of the participants in the experiment were assessed
- Writing skills on the different measurement levels, based on learner autonomy development, were disclosed
- The effectiveness of the experimental influencers was described
- The dynamics of pre- and post- test composition in the test and control groups was characterized

The statistical analysis revealed the positive changes in the quality of compositions. The overview of the results of the change in the learners’ skills initiates a presumption that the change was conditioned by the applied experimental method, based on learner autonomy development in teaching/learning foreign language composition writing. The assessment of the skill retention process was discussed, and the necessity to renew the skills was described.

The research demonstrates the advantages of teaching/learning composition writing based on learner autonomy development. The main aspect in this process is the interaction of internal and external factors, on the basis of which a learner is constructing his/her individual ability and knowledge structure. In connection to the writing process, this means that the most significant and appropriate methods must be based on the variety of tasks and a possibility of choice of teaching/learning methods. Teaching/learning foreign language composition writing should be comprehended as the creation of certain circumstances, in which learners could process the obtained information, applying it in the most acceptable ways, and use diverse learning methods. In respect to this aspect, it is most important to generate new opportunities for teaching/learning, starting from basic aptitudes and encouraging more effective use of information and communication technologies in the teaching/learning process, centered on learner autonomy development.

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#### **Besimokančiojo autonomijos skatinimas iš dėstytojo perspektyvos**

Santrauka

Besimokančiojo autonomijos vystymas šiuo metu turi būti suvokiamas ne kaip mokymo tikslas, bet kalbos vystymo priemonė. Tokiu būdu, mokymas(is) tampa mokytojo (dėstytojo) bendradarbiavimu. Mokymasis nukreiptas į mokinio autonomijos vystymąsi palengvina patį mokymosi procesą ir formuoja besimokančiąją visuomenę. Toks mokymo(si) būdas vysto ne tik kalbinius mokinių įgūdžius, bet ir plečia jų pažinimo lygį, skatina jų sociokultūrinį aktyvumą. Neišvengiamai paliečiami teigiamos nuostatos formavimo, pasitikėjimo savo gebėjimais kėlimo ir savikritiškumo skatinimo klausimai. Besimokančiojo autonomijos vystymas analizuojamas mokymo(si) rašyti rašini aspektu. Straipsnyje apžvelgiamas rašinių mokymo(si) proceso tyrimas Lietuvos vidurinėse mokyklose.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2004 03

Parengtas spaudai 2004 06

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DOI: 10.5755/j01.sal.1.5.43187