

# The Role of Teacher and Pupil in the Context of Autonomous Learning

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## **Abstract**

The paper offers a brief overview of the role of teacher and pupil in the context of autonomous learning. An autonomous pupil means an active pupil. His activity consists not only in motivation to learn, but also in participating in social processes, defining one's own goals and responsibly managing the way to achieve them. The teacher accompanies the active student through the learning process as a manager, mediator, advisor, but also as a fellow pupil. The aim of the paper is to specify the roles and characteristic features of the autonomous teacher and pupil and to point out their differences with respect to the traditional perception of the teacher and pupil in the process of upbringing and education.

## **Keywords**

autonomous learning; autonomous pupil; education; active pupil; teacher; manager; organizer; advisor

## **Introduction**

The teacher and the pupil and their mutual interaction are an integral part of the teaching process, not only in the framework of religious or ethical education, but in the framework of every teaching subject at school, or in the context of inter-subject relationships.<sup>1</sup> If we are talking about autonomous learning, in which the pupil and his activity are in the centre of attention, it is necessary to specify his role and characterize the autonomous, i.e. active, pupil. The pupil's activity can be manifested in various areas, for example, in the area of social processes, organization of own learning activities, taking responsibility for one's own educational process or in the area of the atmosphere in classes. Equally important is the characteristic of the teacher and his role in the context of autonomous learning, because in the teaching process understood in this way, the role of the teacher takes on a new dimension. His priority role is to accompany his pupils in acquiring knowledge and developing competence.

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### **Autonomous pupil**

In the framework of autonomous learning, pupils should actively participate in the learning process together. For example, they can bring their own learning documents and materials to class, learn to evaluate the level of acquisition of their competences or reflect on their own learning process. Based on cooperation, set goals and tasks, a learning community is created, which makes teaching more interesting, enriches it and, above all, motivates pupils to cooperate with each other and change their attitude towards the teaching of the given subject. The individual's own activity is also underlined by Vygotskij (2017), who claims that the pupil is not just a passive receiver, who is influenced by the environment and education, but actively chooses, is an active organism within the environment. For many pupils, this way of participating in classes is still new and unusual.

Konrad and Traub (2023, 26–37) emphasize that autonomous learning must be learned, while pupils must have and develop readiness for self-regulatory activities. In addition, they need to have skills or competences that will contribute to starting and maintaining the process of self-regulated learning. In this context, the following three important personality aspects are involved:

1. Motivation – within the framework of motivation, we can talk about three components that theoretically justify and explain the fundamental elements of autonomous learning. It is a component of values (attachment to consequences, incentives important for action). Another component is that of expectation. The last component of motivation for autonomous learning is the affective components of self-related feelings (emotions) and task-oriented emotional reactions.
2. Learning strategies – if pupils want to successfully manage their tasks, they must have strategic competences. Cognitive strategies that serve to process information, connect it with existing knowledge and maintain it are especially important.
3. Metacognition – every self-initiated learning process involves gradual adjustments and fine-tuning of the learning process. These are carried out using the self-regulation process itself. The pupil must be able to:
  - o determine the starting point of the proceedings,
  - o define goals,
  - o derive courses of action,
  - o recognize the difficulties of the procedure,
  - o perform the necessary learning steps,
  - o during the realization of the procedure, modify one's own procedure, or previous goals.

In this sense, metacognition can be distinguished and implemented at two levels: at the level of metacognitive control (planning, monitoring, management of the learning process) and at the level of metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about one's own cognitive system).

Autonomous pupils decide for themselves what they want to learn, how they will proceed with learning, what materials and aids they will use, what learning strategies they will prefer,

whether they will learn alone or in a team, how they will organize their learning time, and how they will check whether their learning process has been successful.

Berger, Darn and Winter (2023, 18) also note that in this type of learning, the pupil's role must also change – pupils are still active in autonomous learning. This means not only responsible performance of tasks by pupils, but also their participation in the teaching process. In this way, active pupils have the following characteristics:

- they participate in social learning processes, because they cooperate with others and agree on topics and the sequence of learning steps;
- they define their own goals, select relevant material or appropriate activities to achieve these goals, evaluate their own learning progress;
- they are willing and have the will to take their own learning into their own hands and take responsibility for it;
- they participate in improving the processes and atmosphere in classes;
- they feel co-responsible for learning and the feeling of well-being in their learning group.

Konrad and Traub (2023, 38) formulate the following theses, based on which an autonomous pupil can be characterized:

- A successful autonomous pupil possesses numerous general and specific learning strategies and can use them flexibly and thoughtfully.
- In addition to strategic knowledge, he also possesses a wide range of general knowledge and can use it as a rich prior knowledge related to specific learning contents in learning.
- The strategic, metacognitive components and the prior knowledge component are closely involved in the current learning process.
- A good autonomous pupil sees a causal connection between personal effort in implementing and managing a strategy and learning success.
- Finally, he successfully protects his learning behaviour from competing behaviours and inappropriate emotions.

Achieving such a level of pupils' readiness for autonomous learning and their maturity for it requires time and the gradual implementation of changes in their attitudes. In addition, it is necessary that the activities within the autonomous class or learning group are based on the initiative of the pupils, that is, that the pupils choose and decide what they want to do (*learner – initiated activities*). However, it is necessary to realize that the inclusion of autonomous elements in teaching must be a conscious process. Pupil autonomy cannot in any case mean that the pupil does whatever he wants in class, but we emphasize again that he must be accompanied by the teacher in order to come closer and closer to complete autonomy.

### **Teacher and autonomous learning**

According to Tassinari (2010), in order for a change in pupils' participation in the education and training process to be successful, teachers should talk to pupils about the topic of pupil's

autonomy and gradually transfer to them more and more responsibility for the form and regulation of the learning process. Scharle and Szabó (2000) define three steps that can help pupils become more autonomous.

1. The teacher should first create awareness among pupils about autonomy by clarifying the advantages and new perspectives regarding this form of learning. Pupils should be motivated to get involved in this process and think about their learning options outside of the classroom.
2. By practising new skills and competences, the teacher can influence and even slowly change the attitudes and behaviour of pupils.
3. Then the pupils can take on more and more responsibility. They can change the form of the lesson; they have more freedom. This gives them more space to implement their own decisions and ideas regarding the use of different materials or the performance of tasks.

According to the authors mentioned above, the following attributes can also be formulated for classes or learning groups supporting autonomous learning:

- The teacher becomes less of an instructor or trainer, but more of a mediator.
- Pupils are discouraged from relying on the teacher as a central source of knowledge.
- Pupils' ability to learn independently is supported.
- Pupils' awareness of their own learning style is supported.
- Pupils are encouraged to develop their own learning strategies.

Since the degree of self-regulation is individual for each pupil, it is necessary to emphasize the role of the teacher in the process of autonomous learning. In the teaching process, which also includes autonomous learning, the teacher is still an integral and irreplaceable link that is responsible for the organization and outcome of this process. In pedagogical theory, the teacher is referred to as a subject and at the same time as the most relevant motivational factor of teaching. His action also acquires the character of an initiator – a manager of classroom activities (Borsuková 2005, 159). Průcha, Walterová and Mareš (2003, 261) note that the teacher is jointly responsible for the preparation, management, organization and results of the educational process. At the same time, they add, the current perception of the teacher's role is based on an extended professional model and emphasizes his subject-object role in the relationship with pupils and the environment. The teacher co-creates the educational environment, the classroom climate, organizes and coordinates the pupils' activities, manages and evaluates the learning process. From the above, it follows that, according to these authors, the importance of the teacher's social roles in the relationship with pupils, in the team of teachers, in cooperation with parents and the community is increasing. The authors also define two areas from which the specific functions of the teacher arise:

1. the different nature of the activities at certain grades and types of schools, to which the relevant approvals of teachers correspond,
2. differentiation of tasks within the educational process.

Therefore, the teacher is not primarily the main mediator of information and knowledge, the main coordinator leading pupils to acquire and improve knowledge, skills and attitudes. In addition to didactic and professional competence, which are a matter of course for the work of a teacher, he should have the ability and effort to arouse his pupils' interest in the subject and awareness of the need to develop competences for their application either in professional or private life. In professional literature, these abilities are referred to as general competencies supporting the identity of the SELF. They include:

1. empathy (willingness to approach other people),
2. distinguishing positions (do not accept others unreflectively, but maintain a critical distance),
3. communicative competence – the ability of an individual to communicate with other people (Baňasová 2006, 25).

Kalhous and Obst (2002, 114–117) define five performance standards of the teaching profession, on the basis of which they characterize the teacher and his belonging to a certain status and representing his values and ethos in such a way that a certain standard of performance is guaranteed:

1. The teacher is passionate about his pupils and their learning.
2. The teacher knows the subjects he teaches and knows how to teach them.
3. The teacher manages and monitors the pupils' learning.
4. The teacher systematically reflects on his work and learns from his experience.
5. Teachers are members of the learning society (“learning community”).

It is also clear from the mentioned standards that the teaching profession is a dynamic and constantly changing phenomenon. In connection with autonomous learning and the teacher's role in it, we are convinced that at the present time every teacher should support the development of autonomous learning. Just in the recent past, when current events in society in our country and in the world required the active implementation of distance learning in all subjects and at all levels and types of schools, the form of autonomous learning was actively supported by many teachers. The teacher's ability to create an environment, in which pupils feel autonomous and themselves feel the need to become more independent, to participate in the teaching process, is very important today. The teacher helps, instructs, supports, motivates and gives feedback to the pupils, which is very important in our opinion. In this way, it supports the pupils' development of the ability to give instructions to themselves, as well as the ability to guide their learning even when the teacher is not around. Thus, it will gradually pass from the stage of incomplete autonomy to complete autonomy.

Similar to Tassinari (2010, 1), we believe that every teacher should listen carefully to his pupils and know their strengths and weaknesses well. We consider the teacher's ability to motivate pupils to take the initiative to formulate their educational goals, as well as participation in the compilation of learning procedures, to be important. The teacher still coordinates the events during the lesson, and prepares current teaching materials, assigns tasks, which he then constructively evaluates. He is available to pupils as an advisor, a guide to the learning process.

Hao (2017, 568) adds that the autonomous training mode for teachers is a lifelong professional awareness accompanying the entire process of the entire teaching career.

According to Bimmel and Rampillon (2000, 33), autonomy in teaching means a change in thinking for many teachers. Their pedagogical activities should contribute to the emancipation of pupils: they should support their independence, initiative and critical thinking. The teacher should no longer be the centre of the teaching. His task is to moderate the teaching process and create interesting and motivating study situations (stimuli) linked to real life, so that pupils are able to find a job in it after completing their studies. Oates (2019, 1) emphasizes that the role of the teacher is considered paramount in the development of self-regulated learning and the relationship between teacher and pupil is central to the initiation and support of autonomous learning.

Berger et al. (2023, 17) specify the teacher's role in autonomous learning as quite different from traditional, joint teaching. According to them, it is a complex phenomenon that includes several areas of tasks:

1. The teacher as manager and organizer – he prepares appropriate activities for a specific age category of pupils, which are supposed to support their interest and motivation and must be indicated by a clearly formulated assignment and clearly defined results that are expected from the pupils.
2. The teacher as mediator, moderator – the teacher supports the motivation of the pupils and strengthens their responsibility for their own learning process. He guides pupils in planning, implementing and evaluating assignments. In addition, this conveys knowledge and helps develop competence in the given subject. From such a perception of the role of the teacher, it clearly follows that autonomous pupils should in no case learn by themselves but should be accompanied and supported by their teachers.
3. The teacher as a counsellor – the teacher advises and supports pupils by giving them feedback on their work during the learning process.
4. The teacher as a fellow learner – in this sense, the teacher is also understood as a learning being. He learns from his pupils and together with them, growing personally and professionally, because he gains new experiences.

The above-mentioned authors consider the most important role of the teacher in the process of autonomous learning to be relinquishing control of the learning process, so that each pupil can take control of their own learning process. It is a different role than many teachers are familiar with. This task is characterized by many characteristics (Berger et al. 2023, 17) If the teacher acts on his pupils in this way, he

- prepares new work methods for his teaching groups,
- is open to ideas and suggestions from his pupils,
- enables and supports pupils' own initiatives,
- guides students' self-evaluation and evaluates it together with them,
- observes pupils' behaviour and documents it for the purposes of joint evaluation,
- is aware of the individuality and complexity of his pupils,

- informs pupils and parents about lessons – what and why is done in lessons,
- is both a teacher and a pupil and focuses his attention not on teaching, but on learning.

Berger, Darn and Winter (2023, 18) add that such a change in the teacher's role is subject to a process of development and a change of perspective, which is manifested mainly in the teacher's attitude. This changed attitude puts the focus on learning, not teaching. This fact can be concretized by the question: *How can my pupils learn this? And how can I help them?* One can absolutely agree with the stated opinion of the authors, especially in the context of religious or ethical education, when the teacher should eliminate his dominance in the learning group and leave the process of learning and formation to the pupils themselves while on the way to acquiring knowledge, developing competence and forming their own attitudes, they should support and show them the right way.

The key tasks of the teacher in the context of autonomous learning can be summarized in the following key points, which are presented by Haas (2015, 338):

- preparation of the educational environment (activating complex learning situations, cancellation of complexity of teaching materials, taking into account competence models, designing process evaluations),
- structuring learning processes as content reconstruction (use of appropriate methods),
- perception of the extended role of the teacher,
- being a member of the teaching class,
- work in (extracurricular) professional learned groups.

In order for the teacher to be able to take on this new dimension of the teaching profession, he must be active in a form other than face-to-face teaching. However, it should also be borne in mind that the teacher is not only a moderator and a guide to the learning process.

## Conclusion

This teaching concept which is based on independent, self-regulated learning, in which the pupil takes responsibility for his learning process, is largely autonomous. It means that teachers cannot monitor all individual and cooperative learning processes at the same time. It follows that both parties participating in such an organized learning process (teachers and pupils) must be aware of their roles. The roles of the teacher and the pupil, which are relevant in autonomous learning, are diametrically different from the traditional perception of the teacher and the student as the subject and object of the upbringing and education process. Due to the scope of the paper, it is not possible to analyse specific examples of the work of the teacher and the pupil within the framework of autonomous learning in the lessons of, for example, religious or ethical education in pedagogical practice. This topic and its deeper investigation will certainly be the subject of further research and open possibilities for more detailed investigation of the issue as well as space for further publications on this topic.

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