

## *A blessing or a curse? Introducing autonomy to third-year BA students*

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### Abstract

As a requirement for obtaining a BA degree in English philology studies, students have to write an academic paper of considerable length. This is the first work of this kind that they have to complete at the end of the three-year course of study. The supervisor monitoring students in writing the paper faces challenges in helping them find a topic, search for appropriate materials, develop skills in reading, analyzing and synthesizing the information found in the resources, and adopt the required academic style. Motivating students to finalize the paper within the third year of their studies seems to be a difficult task because writing of the paper is an arduous endeavor, especially that they quite often work and have other duties to perform. Completing a diploma paper requires a significant amount of independence on the part of the students in the out-of-class time. The paper presents the findings of a small-scale questionnaire study carried out among three groups of students from three different institutions of higher education writing their diploma papers. The aim of the study was to determine the students' perceptions of and attitudes towards autonomy, as well as their thoughts on the final requirement for gaining the BA degree. The results serve as a basis for drawing some conclusions concerning the development of autonomy in third-year English philology students.

*Keywords:* autonomy; English majors; academic writing; diploma paper; action research

## 1. Introduction

The concept of autonomy has its roots in psychology and only later did it gain interest among educationalists and pedagogues. It is considered by some of the specialists as an innate potential of an individual which can be enhanced by the environment (Erikson, 1959). Other scholars believe in the necessity of training humans to become autonomous because they do not reveal this feature by themselves (Nunan, 1997). In either case, this concept is thought to be essential in human life in which taking decisions, implementing actions and drawing conclusions on the results of these actions are inevitable in solving problems creatively and critically. In the teaching and learning process, classroom time is obviously not enough to develop language skills and extending the development of the target language beyond the scope of school lessons seems inevitable in achieving success. Besides, informal learning of a foreign language is derived from the interests of learners and therefore it provides a good foundation for intrinsic motivation which is long lasting. In English philology studies this independence in learning should be expected as students are already experienced learners of the language. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and, when students get to the third year of their studies and they are required to work for the whole year on an academic paper of an extended length, lack of sufficient skill in independent learning may constitute an obstacle. For supervisors of diploma papers, such a situation poses a challenge because of the time pressure and a lot of individual variety among the students as far as language competence, learning skills and willingness to undertake a prolonged effort in completing the task are concerned. Their task is to help their students graduate with a BA degree but also to get them ready for continuing their academic career towards an MA degree.

## 2. Personal growth

It is worth first looking at the concept of autonomy from the psychological point of view as it seems that the need for independence is imprinted in human life. It was mentioned by Erik Erikson in one of his stages of personal growth. The stages are the realization of the epigenetic principle, according to which the potential for growth is given to a human being (Erikson, 1959). Each stage represents a conflict between two contrasting forces with which the individual struggles. The conflict is solved through the interaction with the environment and then the child moves to the next stage of development. The stages of personal growth, as understood by Erikson, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The stages of personal growth according to Erikson (1959).

Years of life	Conflict	The resolution
0-2	trust vs. mistrust (hope)	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide care and affection and lack of it will lead to mistrust.
2-3	autonomy vs. shame (will)	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. If they succeed, they achieve autonomy if they fail, they experience doubt.
3-6	initiative vs. guilt (purpose)	Children need to enhance control over the environment. If they accomplish this goal, they develop a sense of purpose, if children exercise too much power it leads to disapproval and a sense of guilt.
6-12	mastery vs. inferiority (competence)	Children face the system of schooling and if they accomplish success, they develop a sense of competence and if they fail, they experience inferiority.
13-18	identity vs. diffusion (fidelity)	Teenagers search for their individuality, if they manage to remain true to themselves, they develop confidence and if they fail, they experience confusion.
19-40	intimacy vs. isolation (love)	Young adults want to establish emotional bond with another person. If they manage to obtain it, the relationship is strong. If they fail, they have a sense of loneliness.
40-65	generativity vs. stagnation (care)	Adults need to create and cherish things which will benefit other people. If they manage to do so, they develop a sense of accomplishment. If they are not successful, they seem not to be involved in the world matters.
65 to death	self-acceptance vs. despair (wisdom)	Older adults ought to feel fulfilment in life which leads to the wisdom and calmness. If they fail, they suffer from regret and a sense of loss.

In the period between 2 and 3 years of age, a child moves from the stage of dependence on others to independence. Along with physical maturation which is realized in the ability to walk, the child is now willing to explore the environment and do the activities by himself or herself. If parents support this need for autonomy and self-direction, the child will grow in confidence of being able to manage on his or her own. At this age, it may mean being able to tie the shoelaces, eat with a spoon or brush one's teeth. If parents get impatient and do the things for the child, not allowing for independent effort of their son or daughter to develop the skills by himself or herself, or even mock at the child's efforts, youngsters may experience shame and lose the will to take the initiative in life. The resolution of this conflict leads to the willingness to become self-directed.

The way Erikson (1959) understands autonomy points to the early appearance of this concept in the child's development and the importance of the caretaker's attitude to the potential for growth of this attribute in the period between two and three years of age. If a child is provided with supporting environment to develop self-direction, he or she will be able to take independent actions in the

future. In this way, gaining autonomy is part of human personal growth and people are predisposed for it, an ability which can be supported by the environment or hindered by it. Therefore, autonomy, understood as “feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 2) is a basic human need. A humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers (1959) claims that the human organism has an actualizing tendency which is geared to leading the organism towards autonomy. This tendency is common to all individuals; it can be hindered but it is never subjected to decay because it would devastate the organism (Rogers, 1977). The actualizing tendency is the driving force in Rogers’ theory of personality. Maddi (1996, p. 106) refers to it as a “biological pressure to fulfil the genetic blueprint”. Every person is therefore predisposed to realize this potential.

The question still remains if the need for freedom and the potential for autonomy are the same in all humans and whether it can be enhanced by the environment in any individual. Some children who are anxious by nature reveal the so-called *trait anxiety* (Ellis, 2008), which makes them constantly unsure about themselves and unconfident in what they are to do. Autonomy means being independent in taking decisions and pursuing them. Individuals who are anxious because of this trait may feel even more tense and uncertain if they are offered opportunities to decide which task to undertake. They may prefer to be told what to do because they then feel more confident about the results of their work and remain more reassured while performing an activity. This observation may indicate that some learners may not benefit from efforts to develop autonomy and independence cannot be stimulated in all people to the same extent.

### 3. Faces of autonomy

Autonomy has inspired a lot of researchers in defining the concept and theorizing its different types (see Table 2 below). According to Littlewood (1996), autonomy implies two conditions which have to be met in order for the learners to take advantage of it. The first one is developing the ways of being autonomous and the second one is the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own learning. So learners who have developed the skills necessary for independent learning may not always want to use them. Learners have to both know how to become autonomous but also they should be motivated to do so in order to accomplish success in arriving at autonomous learning. Holec (1981, p. 3) explained that learner autonomy is the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, and this ability “is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way”. Nunan (1997) claims that not many learners enter the classroom as autonomous individuals and it is the teacher’s responsibility to help them develop the

skills which enable independence in learning. Benson and Voller (1997, pp. 1-2) remind us that in language education autonomy refers to five different aspects: *situations* in which learners study on their own, *skills* which can be developed to gain independence in learning, an inborn *capacity* for taking responsibility for one's own learning, *exercises* in training learners to be autonomous, and the *right* of the learners to gain independence. Benson (2001) states that language learners have already mastered their first language which must have been achieved with a considerable degree of autonomy. Learners might have also developed some other skills which were gained through autonomous behaviors. The issue is then to transfer the skills developed in this way to the language learning process.

Table 2. An overview of different terms related to autonomy.

Autonomy (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428)	Autonomy as a capacity involves two components, ability and willingness. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required.
Autonomy (Holec, 1981, p. 3)	An ability to take charge of one's own learning (determining objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, evaluation what has been acquired).
Autonomy (Little, 1991, p. 4)	A capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action.
Autonomy (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11)	The situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions connected with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions.
Autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 50)	The capacity to take control of one's learning at three levels: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content.
Self-directed learning (Benson, 2001, p. 34)	Learning that is carried out under the learner's own direction, rather than under the direction of others. It is a mode of learning in which the learner makes important decisions about content, methods and evaluation.
Self-direction (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11)	A particular attitude to the learning task where the learner accepts the responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions.
Programmed learning (Benson, 2001, p. 11)	A mode of instruction in which learners are expected to work in their own way, at their own pace, through materials prepared by teachers.
Self-instruction (distance learning) (Dickinson, 1987)	A situation in which learners study languages on their own, primarily with the aid of 'teach-yourself' materials. It is controlled by the teacher who may not be present but he or she makes decisions as to what will be learned, how it will be learned and how it will be assessed.
Self-instruction (Jones, 1998, p. 378)	A deliberate long-term learning project, instigated, planned and carried out by the learner alone, without teacher intervention.

As can be observed in Table 2, autonomy is understood and realized in many different ways and there are various degrees of its intensity in language education. Autonomy is seen as an ability or capacity which is put into practice with a greater or lesser degree of teacher involvement in establishing the aims, choosing the techniques and materials as well as evaluating one's progress. It ultimately leads to full autonomy in which there is no intervention from the outside

and an individual learns all by himself or herself. Autonomy is a kind of potential that learners reveal and they can exercise self-directed learning depending on the degree of that capacity. A self-access center which was a prime example of the environment in which the learners can continue their language education outside school is nowadays being replaced by access to the Internet which offers numerous opportunities for listening to and reading in authentic English as well as using it in a social network.

Nunan (1997, p. 195) presents a scheme of introducing different levels of autonomy to learners. At the first level, called *awareness*, learners are acquainted with the goals, content and strategies needed in the learning process. This is also the time when they identify their learning styles and strategies which suit them best. At the next level, named *involvement*, learners are asked to make their choices from the options given as far as the goals are concerned. The next stage, labelled *intervention*, allows learners to modify the goals, the content and the tasks to have them better suited to their needs. *Creation*, which is the last but one level, encourages the learners to designate their own goals, contents and tasks. Designing a questionnaire or conducting an interview are the recommended forms of activity at this stage. At the last level, learners are expected to extend classroom learning to real life and become teachers and researchers by themselves. In these ways, learners are led to full autonomy through carefully graded steps. The last level, in which the content of classroom learning is linked to the outer world, is known as *transcendence*. At this stage, learners become fully independent trying to apply to real life situations the knowledge and skills developed in the classroom (Nunan, 1997).

The skills necessary to enhance and foster autonomy in learning can be developed through metacognitive strategy training (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 137). The ability to think about one's own learning, which is also known as metacognition, begins to emerge in the fourth stage of cognitive growth, according to Piaget (1957) (cited in Child, 2007). This involves thinking about *how* one learns and not only what is to be learned. In practice, it means that learners acquire the skill of planning their learning, monitoring the process and self-evaluating the outcomes. Those skills are applicable to all learning, not only of the language, but also of other subject areas, which eventually leads to becoming more effective in the process of learning. Through writing the diploma the students are intended to develop the skills of independent learning which will assist them in working towards their MA degree.

#### 4. The study

The author wished to investigate the concept of autonomy in BA students at the end of their third year of study. Having supervised 40 students in writing their

diploma paper in three different institutions of higher education, she was interested in finding out what the attitude to autonomy was among the students, how they perceived the concept and what they thought about the experience of writing their diploma paper towards the completion of this task.

#### 4.1. The context of the study

Students in the third year of their BA studies have to write a diploma paper in order to be awarded the degree. The present study comprises students from three different institutions: Foreign Language Teacher Training College (FLTTC) in Wrocław, Witelon State University of Applied Sciences in Legnica (WSUAS) and Philological School of Higher Education (PSHE) in Wrocław. In Foreign Language Teacher Training College, third-year students are required to write an action research paper. This is a diploma paper which is based on classroom practice and it involves an implementation of a research action in order to solve a problem in teaching and learning. Teacher trainees teach one group of learners over the time of the research and design a research procedure which consists of 6 to 8 lessons with certain actions planned, administered, observed and reflected upon. This research is designed in order to collect data by means of at least three different instruments: a teacher's diary, lesson observations conducted by peer teacher trainees, and questionnaires completed by learners. This paper is enriched with a five-page summary of relevant literature on the issue being investigated. The thirty-page diploma paper also includes data analysis which enables drawing conclusions and suggesting recommendations for further research and language education. In Witelon State University of Applied Sciences, third-year students are expected to write an academic paper on translation studies, literature or applied linguistics. It is a thirty-page text which is composed of three chapters, two of which are based on a literature review and the last is devoted to the research study which should be a practical application of the theoretical concepts. The empirical chapter analyzes the translation of selected literary works, films or other cultural artefacts. The data come from instances of language forms being searched for and compared in two languages. If the topic of the diploma paper is related to methodology, students choose a questionnaire as the most common instrument for collecting data from the participants of the teaching and learning process. Finally, in Philological School of Higher Education, third-year students are required to write an academic paper on applied linguistics and methodology. PSHE is a private school for extramural students who mostly work as in-service teachers during the weekdays. They also have to write approximately thirty pages of an academic paper. Here again the paper is composed of three chapters, two of which are theoretical in nature

while the third one is recommended to be empirical. This means that students are encouraged to conduct a small-scale study based on the classroom context and to use such instruments as a questionnaire, an observation sheet or a lesson plan. It has to be noted that in the FLTTC, the practical part of the diploma paper is the main and an obligatory part of the paper in the other two schools, the papers are more theoretical and the empirical parts are optional.

The author of the article has observed that students face problems with this extended academic work which they have to write for the first time in their educational experience and that is why she has decided to investigate the reasons for the difficulties and reflect on her own experience as well as the students' voices in this respect. The investigator has also observed that students in the three institutions differ in their attitude to the diploma paper they are requested to write and there is also quite a lot of individual variation within each of the groups from the three institutions as far as independence is concerned. For students in the FLTTC, the action research project is quite a challenge but as they spend two days at school throughout the whole academic year teaching and observing the lessons, it makes the project more natural and approachable. Students at Witelon State University of Applied Sciences find it less motivating to complete the project and the main challenge of the researcher is to get them involved and persevere in carrying out the work. Extramural students of Philological School of Higher Education are highly engaged in the process of writing the diploma paper, mainly because they pay for their studies and also they need a diploma confirming their qualifications for school authorities. Within each of the groups from the three institutions, there were also individuals who could work independently from the beginning and only needed the supervisor for occasional backup. However, there were also students who required constant support from the tutor and they did not reveal independence in learning till the very end of the writing process.

#### 4.2. Research questions

The study described in the article aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of autonomy among the third-year BA students in the three institutions?
2. What is the attitude to autonomy among the participants of the study?
3. What are the problems in writing the diploma paper as seen by the participants?
4. What is the attitude to the diploma paper among the participants of the research?

### 4.3. Participants

The study involved 40 students from three institutions of higher education: 18 students from Foreign Language Teacher Training College in Wrocław, 11 students from Witelon State University of Applied Sciences in Legnica, and 11 students from Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław. The students from the FLTC in Wrocław were pursuing a three-year training program preparing them to become English teachers. As their diploma paper was to include only five pages of theoretical background and the extended empirical part was based on their teaching practice in school, the work on it involved them actively all the time and the students were eager to take part in it. Apart from studying at FLTC, teacher trainees very often give private lessons in English and sometimes they also study at other universities. The participants from WSUAS in Legnica studied English philology with translation as their primary major. Writing an extended theoretical paper was quite a challenge mainly because the students found it difficult to read academic texts and paraphrase them. Very often the formal style of language required for the paper posed difficulties as well. These students also quite often work in different places of employment, not always related to the discipline they study. The students from PSHE in Wrocław completed an extramural three-year course of study in English philology with a teaching profile. Most of the students from this school were in-service teachers who were willing to gain qualifications as teachers of English. For them, managing the time to write while they worked during the week and studied over the weekends was not always easy and some of them struggled with the language necessary to meet the standards of academic writing.

### 4.4. Instruments and procedures

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which aimed at investigating the perceptions of autonomy and attitudes towards this concept among the third-year students in the three institutions of higher education under consideration. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to explore the problems students face while writing their diploma paper and the attitude they reveal to this requirement for achieving a BA degree. In the questionnaire, the concept of autonomy was defined in different ways and the respondents were requested to choose the options which they mostly believed in. The options suggested by the author of the study were rooted in the literature on the topic and included: being able to take decisions what to do, being able to set the aims, being independent financially, being able to work on one's own, being able to assess one's own progress, being able to use learning strategies, knowing one's

strengths and weaknesses, taking up new tasks and activities, and being willing to deal with difficult problems. Apart from these closed-ended answers, the students were also allowed to include their own ideas of how they understood the concept of autonomy. The respondents were also asked whether they considered themselves autonomous and were encouraged to give reasons for their answers. They were also requested to decide what it meant for a person to be autonomous. Options were suggested that such an individual had to be used to it from childhood, had to know how to do it, had to be willing to manifest autonomy, had to have special personality features, had to have special conditions created, had to be forced to be independent, and had to be mature enough to do it. As in the previous closed-ended questions, space was offered for the students to fill in their ideas about the issue. The next question investigated the attitude of the respondents towards autonomy. The second part of the questionnaire was devoted to exploring the respondents' views on writing the diploma paper. In the first question in this part, the students were requested to decide which stage of writing the diploma paper was the most challenging. They were given options to choose from, that is finding a topic, searching for materials, reading articles and books on the topic, writing the text of the paper, referring to the resources, designing the instruments, conducting the research part, analyzing the data, and writing conclusions. Also in this case, they had a chance to mention other problems they might have experienced. In the next question, the students were offered an opportunity to voice their ideas about what the requirements for gaining the BA degree should be in their view. The options put forward by the author were as follows: writing a classroom-based project, writing an academic paper, writing lesson plans, writing a final test in methodology, and taking an oral exam.

The author was supervising the diploma papers of all the participants. She was insistent from the very beginning that the students choose the topic of their diploma paper by themselves. Some of the students expressed a view that they would prefer the supervisor to give them a list of topics to select from. The researcher, however, believes that if students decide on a topic by themselves, they can pursue their interests, get more motivated in searching through the materials and become responsible for the outcome of their work. Thus, the main principle for finding a topic should be students' interests, their linguistic potential, the content of the paper, as well as the availability of the sources. The researcher obviously offered help to all the students in selecting the necessary materials, suggesting books and articles which might be of relevance and also guiding the students in using Internet resources. The students faced problems in reading academic texts, analyzing and then summarizing them in the chapters and subchapters of their papers. The supervisor suggested some techniques

useful in reading academic texts by asking the students to read such texts at home and then analyze them in class or by giving hints as to how to read such texts and how to synthesize them on their own. She also recommended that the students conduct the empirical study on the basis of the theory related to the topic described in the theoretical chapters. Application of theory to practice motivates students because it becomes their own study and they can identify its links with real life purposes. The students in all three institutions were offered tutoring hours and they could contact the researcher via e-mail. Such easy access to the supervisor establishes a close relationship with the students, which helps encouraging them and enables the researcher to monitor the writing process. The students themselves asked the supervisor to impose deadlines for submitting the consecutive parts of the paper as they claimed this made them more disciplined and helped them organize their time. The proficiency level and the skill of writing differed significantly in all three institutions and within each group of the subjects. Some students could write nearly error-free texts while others needed to have basic mistakes corrected.

Table 3. Research procedure.

No	Step
1.	Briefing students on writing the diploma paper.
2.	Reading articles related to the topics of diploma papers and discussing them.
3.	Assisting students in choosing the topic of their diploma papers.
4.	Practicing paraphrasing and summarizing academic texts.
5.	Introducing basic concepts related to autonomy and "learning to learn".
6.	Exercising ways of referring to sources, quoting and compiling bibliography.
7.	Presenting research methods, instruments of data collection and analysis.
8.	Leading show-and-tell sessions to report the progress of students' work on diploma papers.
9.	Offering assistance to students in one-to-one tutorials.
10.	Administering a questionnaire investigating attitudes to autonomy and writing a diploma paper.

Unfortunately, one year for writing a diploma paper is insufficient to master the skill of composing it to an adequate degree and to complete the paper itself. This obviously imposes an additional burden on the supervisor who has to ensure a high level of both language and content of the paper. The main aim of the researcher was to get the students involved in the writing and finalize their work on the diploma paper. They were not informed explicitly that they were being introduced to autonomous learning although the topic of autonomy and "learning to learn" was covered in one of the classes in all the three groups. The procedure used in the course of the study is presented in Table 3.

## 4.5. Results

The questionnaires were distributed in all the three groups of third-year students from Foreign Language Teacher Training College (FLTTC), Witelon State University of Applied Sciences (WSUAS) and Philological School of Higher Education (PSHE). They were then analyzed by the researcher separately for each institution.

### 4.5.1. Understanding autonomy

In answering the question concerning what autonomy means to them, the students chose the answers presented in Figure 1. As can be seen, the most common answers in all three groups on how autonomy can be interpreted were connected with being able to take decisions and work on one's own. Some other ideas mentioned by the students involved: "Focusing more on learning than on what somebody teaches me", "Being able to achieve goals despite factors which should theoretically prevent me from reaching them", and "Finding and creating my own ways of effective learning".

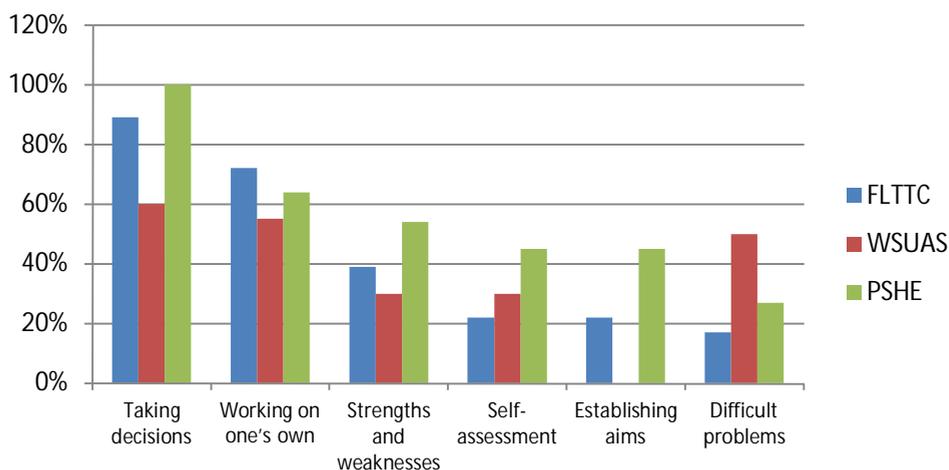


Figure 1. Understanding autonomy.

### 4.5.2. The degree of autonomy

As for the question whether the students consider themselves autonomous, 87% of the respondents answered 'yes' and 13% 'no'. The ones who were positive about themselves as autonomous gave the reasons such as: "I know my strengths and weaknesses", "I consider myself quite an efficient student", "I

believe in learning in many situations, not only in the classroom”, or “Because I know what I am able to achieve”. A more elaborate justification was as follows: “I think I am an autonomous person because I try to do everything on my own, sometimes with a little help from my family, friends or teachers. If I fail, I always know that it is my fault and I do not blame anybody for my mistakes”. One student from FLTTC, who was also a student at the Technical University of Wrocław, explained in an elaborate way why he considers himself autonomous:

*Since I study two different subjects simultaneously, I was given a chance to benefit from an individual course of study. It requires from me a considerable amount of autonomy. Firstly, I need to decide for myself which courses I need to attend and which I would be able to pass, acquiring the knowledge by myself. I am given a chance to decide and as a result I am expected to choose wisely. Secondly, I would call myself an autonomous learner since I am actually able to learn on my own, as well as find the necessary information and ways of acquiring it without any help.*

The 13% of the respondents who did not think of themselves as being autonomous offered as an explanation mainly financial reasons: “I live with my parents so I can’t make my own decisions because I am still dependent on them”, “I am dependent financially on my parents”, or “It’s hard to assess”.

#### 4.5.3. Understanding of being autonomous

The next question concerned what it meant to be autonomous, with the responses being presented in Figure 2. As can be seen from this graphical representation, in all the three groups, what is required to be autonomous are the willingness and maturity. The answers also referred to the ability to know how to be autonomous and to being used to independence from childhood.

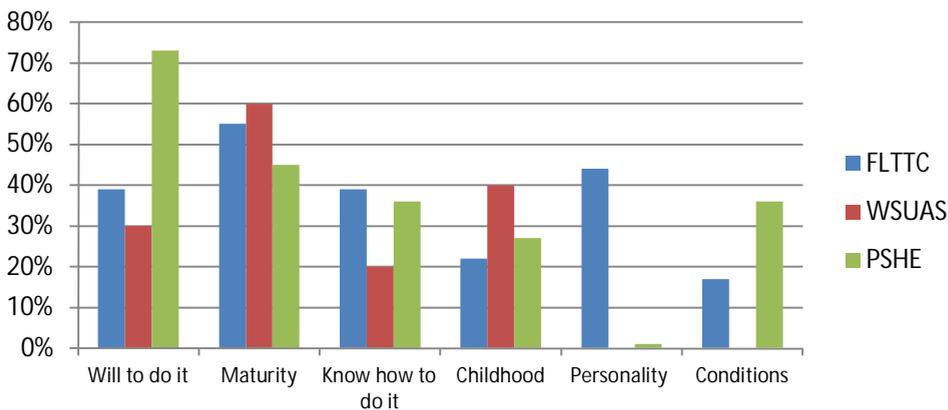


Figure 2. Understanding of being autonomous.

#### 4.5.4. Attitudes towards autonomy

82% of the students revealed a generally positive attitude towards autonomy, with 18% remaining neutral thus leaving no one with a negative attitude. Some feedback on the positive approach to autonomy is expressed in the following statements: “This is a natural process of growing up and becoming an adult”, “People should be autonomous within the capacity to make un-coerced decisions” or “Because we can only count on ourselves in life, often nobody can help us and we have to make decisions ourselves”.

#### 4.5.5. Problems with writing the diploma paper

In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were requested to voice their ideas about writing the diploma paper. The first question in this part aimed at identifying the main problems students experienced while composing this piece of academic writing, with the responses being graphically presented in Figure 3.

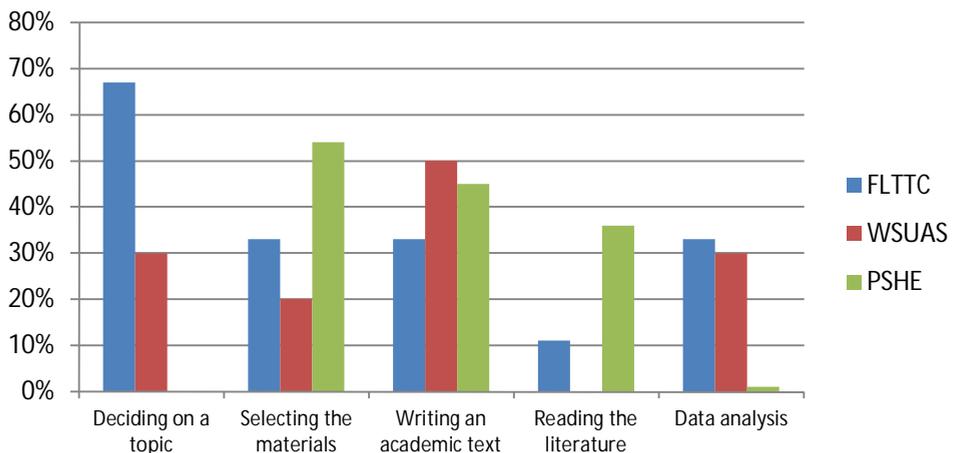


Figure 3. The most common problems in writing the diploma paper.

Deciding on the topic was considered the most difficult by the college students while the students from the private school who mostly work as teachers did not find this a problem at all. The reason for might be that, as in-service teachers, the respondents were aware of what might be interesting for them to investigate in order to develop as professionals. Selecting materials for the diploma paper was, on the other hand, the most difficult for the private school students, perhaps because they are extramural students and they work during weekdays so finding the time to visit libraries or even search through the materials on

the Internet poses a challenge for them. Writing an academic text was the most difficult for the HSPE and WSUAS students. One of the reasons for this situation may be related to the language level of the participants as well as the fact that the students did not have the experience in writing such papers. For the FLTTC students, the writing was not so problematic perhaps because of their target language level as well as the fact that they had to write only five pages based on a review of the relevant literature while the students from the other two institutions were expected to compile approximately 20 pages of the theoretical background. Some other problems mentioned by the respondents were: "Searching for materials takes a lot of time", "Finding sophisticated vocabulary, writing in the passive voice and transforming the text from books" or "Choosing the research questions".

#### 4.5.6. Views on the final requirement for obtaining a BA degree

The questionnaire also invited the participants to offer their views on what the requirements for receiving the BA degree should be like (see Figure 4). The most surprising finding to this question was that the students from WSUAS most often chose writing a diploma paper, even though they experienced the greatest difficulty in composing an academic text. The remaining two groups revealed similar preferences for the two main options of writing a diploma paper or taking a written exam. Conducting a classroom-based research project, for obvious reasons of having the experience of carrying out this kind of study in the third-year of college education, was predominantly chosen by the FLTTC students. It was also favored by the PSHE students as they were school teachers who are involved in everyday classroom practice. The WSUAS students had to design lessons for their methodology course and this is perhaps the explanation for their responses to the questionnaire item.

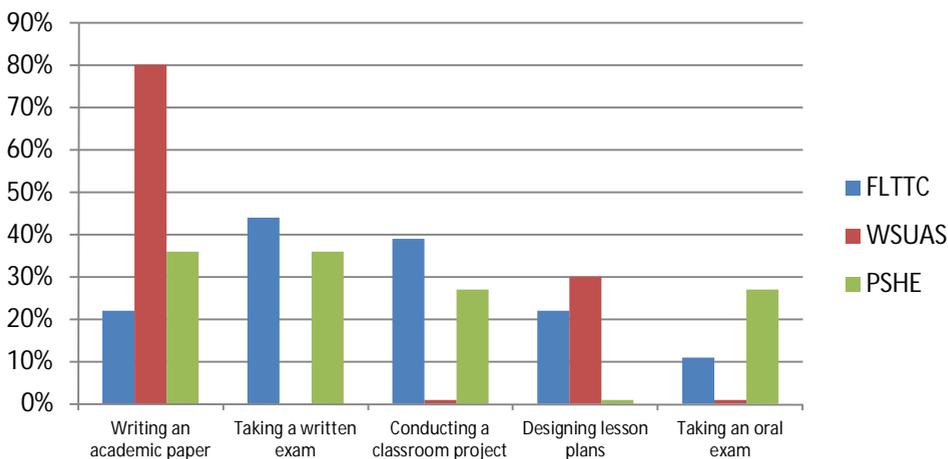


Figure 4. Views on the requirements for a BA degree.

#### 4.5.7. Reasons for writing an academic paper

The students voiced their ideas about writing a diploma paper and taking a final written exam in the open-ended part of the survey. Some of them put forward the argument of motivation as a driving force induced by necessity of producing the diploma paper. Subject 1 expressed this view in the following way:

*Writing a thesis has many advantages - students are allowed to choose topic(s) they are interested in and develop knowledge and skills in a narrow field. Due to the above-mentioned fact they gain the opportunity to become a specialist in some area. An important factor is here the positive motivation resulting from own choice which contributes to readiness for hard and arduous work – reading many books, choosing appropriate texts and paraphrasing them.*

The motivating effect of having to write a diploma paper is also mentioned by Subject 2, who also emphasizes the fact that motivation leads an individual to manifest autonomous learning. This is visible in the following excerpt:

*For a BA degree, students should definitely write a diploma paper and not take a written exam. Writing the paper and doing research for it is far more challenging and motivating than acquiring knowledge from fields that may not be within the interest of the student. Furthermore, it is vital for the future Bachelor's degree holders to be autonomous in their learning and researching process.*

Students from PSHE highlighted the opportunity for testing theoretical knowledge in practice as it is available through the empirical part of the diploma paper. This view was expressed by Subject 3 in the following way:

*Another aspect is the possibility to use and check out the theoretical knowledge in a practical way instantly, for example, at work or serving an apprenticeship, since many students have already a job or training period in a company or school. Therefore, writing a thesis is from my point of view more useful as it can lead to obtaining better vocational qualifications.*

According to the respondents, the issue of developing language skills through working on the diploma paper cannot be overlooked. As suggested by Subject 4,

*The process of writing a diploma paper builds up not only knowledge but many skills. In that way, students are given the opportunity to develop their writing skills, reading, paraphrasing. The development of the ability to search for information seems also to be the focal point of the process and it may be used in other aspects of life.*

For another PSHE student (Subject 5), it is the management skills which counts the most in pursuing the diploma paper. This is visible in the following comment:

*I believe the topic of the diploma paper will, undoubtedly, aid the student to enhance motivation in order to do a more extensive research, but, on the other hand, I also consider the topic ends up being secondary in a BA thesis, and it is discipline and responsibility what in the end becomes the principal aim.*

Yet another argument raised in favor of writing a diploma paper is expressed by Subject 6. In her view, expansion of knowledge of the topic seems to be the main advantage of this requirement for being awarded a BA degree:

*Because students write the diploma paper themselves, they already know the subject inside out so it is also easier for them to prepare for the oral part of the exam. Moreover, it is more fun to write and therefore learn about something which one finds interesting.*

As can be inferred from the excerpts, the participants believe that writing a diploma paper fosters motivation and autonomy, links theory with practice, develops language skills and the knowledge of the subject matter, as well as imposing self-discipline and organization.

#### 4.5.8. Reasons for taking the final exam

The arguments for taking a written examination were also made explicit by the respondents. One of the subjects (Subject 7) discussed the problem of BA students not being ready to write a specialized academic paper as they are still in the process of gaining general knowledge. This is evident in the following comment:

*First of all, licentiate in Poland is the first of academic degrees and it is the very basis for future academic development. After three years of studying, students are expected to gain general knowledge of their field of study and not specialize in any specific subject. Assuming there was the final exam, it would be a great opportunity for the undergraduates to ground their knowledge and, in result, become better specialists.*

Another argument in favor of taking a final exam instead of writing a diploma paper was expressed by Subject 8 who stresses lack of preparation for the former in terms of research methodology. This participant added that the papers are often not original and do not reveal profound analysis of the topic area. This is visible in the following comment:

*Another limitation of writing thesis is that students have not got sufficient knowledge of research methodology or statistics to do their thesis in a conscientious and adequate way.*

*This results in theses with cursory methodology and findings sections. On the top of that, the whole licentiate papers are usually written in a very desultory matter, they remind so called "ctrl C ctrl V" compositions. They are very secondary and lack penetration of the given subject.*

Another viewpoint was raised by Subject 9 who indicated that the process of writing a diploma paper is tedious and time-consuming and, at the same time, it does not reveal the student's knowledge of the subject. As she put it,

*Writing a diploma paper is usually the process of finding a source, paraphrasing it and quoting, which doesn't mean that the student really acquired that knowledge. Moreover, writing a diploma paper is extremely time consuming, it takes a lot of time and effort on the part of the student, and it requires a great amount of input from the relevant supervisor and the final grade doesn't necessarily reflect the level of the student's knowledge.*

As a result, preparation for the final exam requires revisiting the whole material covered during the program of study and therefore the final assessment reflects the student's true competence. As Subject 10 explains,

*On the other hand, when students prepare to take an exam they must study the subject thoroughly. To pass exams, students read a variety of sources and gain knowledge from the whole area of studies. What they write during an exam is what they really know and understand, they don't have any books in front of them so it is something that has really sunk in, and that is what should be graded and appreciated. Therefore, the grade scored on a written exam would be more accurate than a graded diploma paper.*

The proponents of taking the final exam instead of writing a diploma paper offered a number of arguments to defend their stance. These included lack of adequate preparation for writing a paper, superficiality of tackling the topic area, abundant investment of time and effort in working on the diploma paper, or limited reliability of the final grade in assessing the diploma paper, compared to the knowledge tested on a final exam.

## 5. Conclusions

As far as the perception of autonomy in the third-year BA students in the three institutions is concerned, the respondents believe that it means being able to take decisions about what to do and being able to work on one's own. None of the students from WSUAS chose the ability to establish the aims of their own work as a possible interpretation of autonomy while the students from the remaining two institutions pointed to this meaning of autonomy as being important. The majority of the respondents consider themselves to be autonomous

individuals, indicating that the main reason for not being autonomous is financial dependence on others. The justification for this choice might be found in the fact that a lot of the students have jobs and earn their own money in this way. The subjects of the study believe that in order to be autonomous one has to be willing to do so and has to be mature enough. However, the will to be independent is highlighted most strongly by the students of PSHE in Wrocław. According to the BA students under investigation, one has to possess the skill of being autonomous and be used to it from childhood. Contrary to the respondents from the other institutions, the FLTC students consider personality features as predisposing certain individuals to exhibit autonomous behavior. Also the students from WSUAS do not indicate the necessity of creating special conditions for enhancing autonomy in human beings. In general, the students from the three institutions of higher education reveal a positive attitude to autonomy.

As the main problems in writing the diploma paper, the subjects from FLTC mentioned finding the topic, while this aspect was not considered difficult for the participants from PSHE, which may be due to the fact that working already as in-service teachers, they found it easy to pick topics of professional interest. For the latter students though, searching for materials and reading them was much more difficult than for the other respondents, perhaps because working full-time they found it challenging to find the time for these aspects of working on the diploma paper. On the other hand, being very close to the research context, the students from PSHE did not experience difficulties in analyzing the data. Writing the paper turned out to be the least problematic to the FLTC students who seemed to be the most proficient. Reading articles and books was not so challenging for the participants of the study from two institutions: WSUAS and FLTC. A possible explanation for this finding might be that the WSUAS students chose mainly translation studies, which is their major, as the topic of their diploma paper while college students felt quite at ease while consulting sources on methodology and applied linguistics.

When it comes to the attitudes of the respondents towards the diploma paper, 41% wanted to write an academic paper, 31% would like to take a written exam, 28% preferred to conduct a classroom-based project, 21% were willing to design lesson plans, while 15% expressed the view that they would rather take an oral exam. It turned out then that most of the participants, despite various problems they faced, preferred writing the diploma paper in order to be conferred the BA degree. It may well be that this finding results from less anxiety which may be experienced while working on this academic piece of writing compared to the amount of stress involved while taking a final exam.

Higher education and a university diploma do not guarantee employment opportunities at present times while getting a good job is for many young people

a condition for gaining independence. There are also many more students now in Poland than in the past, which results from a drive to achieve higher education. This means, however, that not all of the students are predisposed for developing the required academic skills and perhaps they should aim instead at gaining professional skills in vocational institutions. In addition, in the contemporary world, a person has to change qualifications more often than in the past to meet the requirements of the labor market which are changing nowadays more rapidly than any time before. This is why, gaining one diploma may be insufficient to function professionally. Many university students search for jobs while they are still studying in order to benefit from professional experience and achieve financial independence. They may, therefore, have less time for studying and having a job also makes them sometimes less motivated to finish their course of study. Completing academic education does not always mean that they will become more competitive on the job market.

While supervising students in writing their diploma papers, the instructor has to be cautious to monitor their work and offer assistance whenever necessary. The main condition for the students to get motivated to undertake the long-term project is to allow them to choose the theme of their paper independently. It is not always easy but once it is carried out successfully, it helps students become responsible for the completion of the paper and develop a sense of usefulness of what they are doing. Obviously, the supervisor's support is necessary throughout the whole process of writing the diploma paper and setting deadlines for submitting consecutive chapters seems to be an efficient disciplining measure. The teacher's advice may seem inevitable while choosing the materials and resources for the literature survey. Students have a tendency to search through the Internet to find the relevant texts and this is not always the most reliable source. Apart from developing the skill of reading, analyzing, synthesizing, paraphrasing and quoting, students also have to develop the academic style of writing. This seems to be the most difficult goal to achieve within the very short time available for writing the paper. The next condition for developing an autonomous attitude and getting the students involved is following the right design of the empirical part to their paper. This allows applying the information gained from the theoretical sources in practice and helps establishing links between the theory and tangible outcomes. It is this part that makes students identify themselves the most with their paper and it also turns out to be the part which they are proud of the most. In times when academic studies are often divorced from real-life purposes, achieving this goal seems to be the most valuable.

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