

7. DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Autonomy: the learner's perspective

Teachers have become increasingly interested in finding ways to 'teach learners how to fish' rather than giving them a fish at a time. Teachers now actively aim to develop learners' awareness of the language learning process, and ability to make informed, independent decisions about that process. However, this goal is not always understood or appreciated by learners.

Learner autonomy requires freedom of choice. Students must have some control over their learning and an awareness of that freedom. Also they must want independence and be able to use it. Here we look at some of the obstacles to encouraging learner autonomy.

Learner resistance

Many learners have little experience in making decisions about their learning. As we have noticed through the book, they may come from backgrounds where the teacher is the source of all knowledge and is expected to provide the answers to all aspects of learning. When asked for example to decide what to learn next, learners may be taken aback, wondering why the teacher does not just tell them. Isn't *she* the expert?

Learners may also see little value in some activities designed to encourage autonomy. When asked to spend time evaluating their own progress learners may feel that the teacher could just give them a test and the score will give them the information they need. Parents, too, may question the amount of time in class spent on such 'non-language' activities. Learner expectations need to be carefully taken into account.

A third point is that developing autonomy requires engaging learners' higher thinking skills. Critical reflection, awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, conscious decision-making are all difficult skills. When asked to apply them to new learning, and express them in a new language, many learners feel overwhelmed. Imagine how powerless you would feel if the following thoughts were going through your mind after a few weeks in a new ESL class, and not being able to express them:

I don't want to assess my own writing, I just want to know what's wrong with it.

Why does she keep asking us what we want to learn next? Why don't we just move on to the next chapter?

He wants us to work in pairs all the time but I don't want to work with the person who happens to be sitting next to me.

I don't like to tell everyone in class what I did wrong on a test.

Curriculum and materials constraints

Many teachers work within strict curricula or materials that leave little room for individual choice. In situations where the teacher directs all classroom activities and it is decided beforehand what will be done when, for how long, where and how, learners are likely to become dependent on the teacher. Similarly, if you teach on a

course that builds up to a large exam, this will greatly determine what is learned and how, potentially further reducing opportunities for independent learning.

Next, we look at some ways in which teachers can deal with constraints such as the above.

Provide a rationale

As with all change, knowing what is happening and why, is crucial to learners being able to adapt. Acknowledge that for some learners your methods may be new. Explain what exactly you will do and what students can expect from you. Explain why you are doing things in a certain way. One of us recently had a graduate student come and speak to pre-university learners. The student talked about some of the challenges she faced, and how she had to deal with them on her own. Another often used approach is to discuss the characteristics of 'the good language learner' and to show that many of them depend on being proactive and independent. More of an incentive than a rationale but in some cases useful is to make it clear to students that they will be assessed not only on the outcomes of their learning but also on the process and how they approach their learning.

Take it slowly

As with all classroom activities, teachers draw on what learners already know and adapt the level accordingly. If your learners appear highly dependent on you and have little experience in independent learning, then asking them to critically analyze their language learning needs and to make individual plans, may be too demanding. Instead, you could begin by asking them to evaluate their own progress on occasion; you could simply ask how they felt they did on a certain task and what made it difficult for them. Or you could ask them to work in pairs and ask each other.

Working with other students

- as per original text

Self-access language learning

Here are some of the features to look for when selecting materials for such a center. You could use the table below as a tool for a quick evaluation when looking at materials for example in a bookstore.

FEATURES
Selecting the resource Claims to be suitable for self-access Clearly describes student level Needs to be used sequentially
Accessing the parts of the resource An index A table of contents A detailed 'map' A glossary

Chapter previews or summaries
The learning process Information summarized Examples provided for tasks Objectives provided for tasks Keys/answers/criteria for tasks
Learning to learn Notes on the learning process Shows how to set get goals

Selecting the resource first involves determining if the materials are classified as suitable for self-access by the publisher. Often this is explicitly stated on the back cover or in the introduction. Next, have a look at the description of the student level the material is aimed at (you'll be surprised how often this is missing). Finally, self-access materials need to be able to be used based on student need or interest, and not necessarily from start to finish.

Accessing the parts of the resource is crucial if learners want to be able to find their way around a book or cdrom by themselves. An index or a table of contents helps. By 'map' we mean the kind of pathways that some resources include to suggest possible ways of using it.

Learners generally need support with the independent learning process and good self-access materials include examples, answer keys, objectives, and summarize key information for the user. Similarly, learners need help with knowing how to use a resource and how it relates to the students goals and needs.

Independence: The Learners' Perspective

The terms learner *autonomy*, *self-access* and *independent learning* all reflect a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner as central to the language learning process.

In a class for new speakers of English there are a couple of major obstacles to achieving independence. One is that students often do not have enough language to say what they want. The other is that they may not be particularly interested in the course outcomes.

Imagine how powerless you would feel after a few weeks in your new ESL class if you didn't have enough English to say what you were thinking:

"She wants us to work in pairs but I don't want to work with this person who happens to be sitting next to me."

"We should spend more time in the computer room. That's where I feel safe."

"I want to start from the beginning because my English is so bad. Why did the teacher put me into this Level 2 class?"

“I liked that book we worked from last week. Why can't we keep using it?”

“My friend in the class next door says they do speaking drills every morning. I wish I could be in that class.”

If your students are thinking like this, it will be harder for you to ease them into learning situations that foster independence. It's difficult too for students to embrace independent language learning if the teacher is directing all the classroom activities, telling them exactly what to do, for how long, where and how. Students may feel they aren't fully part of the mainstream of school life, especially if they are withdrawn from activities like sports and music and art lessons.

Adults may have additional reasons for preferring to remain dependent on the teacher. Independence is secondary when a person is dealing with problems of dislocation, homesickness, quite possibly a loss of social standing in the new community, looking for work, and having to turn to others for help all the time. For those burdened with an array of new decisions, it may simply be more comfortable to let someone else take charge of lessons.

Working with Other Students

Group activities convey the message that the teacher is not at the center of all learning situations. However, some ESL students, as well as the parents of younger students, wonder if this is such a good idea. They are concerned that the English they or their children hear when working together may not be “correct”.

Such concerns may be addressed in part by passing on what you know about language learning. Language learners need practice speaking as well as listening. Making mistakes is part of testing how a new language works. Feedback from others tells speakers if they are making sense. Speaking and listening in small, friendly groups builds the confidence needed to do so in more public settings. And finally, research has shown that learners very rarely pick up mistakes made by other learners.

There are also things you can do to ease students, especially those who look to you to tell them what to do, into functioning more independently during group work and discussions.

- Set clear guidelines for the outcome of group activities.
- When an activity is under way, ask students how much longer they want to complete it.
- Invite groups to choose their own topics during conversation sessions.
- Assign roles within the group, such as the encourager, the recorder, the reporter, the person who keeps the group on track.
- Before or after group sessions, discuss strategies for turn-taking, for clarification, and for offering and listening to differing opinions or conclusions.
- Encourage students to act as “buddies” for the newest arrivals.

Using Self-Access Materials

In a self-access center individuals can work on their own while still being able to turn to the teacher for guidance. This starts to shift responsibility for learning on to the students. Here are some of the features to look for when selecting materials for such a center.

1. ANSWERS ARE PROVIDED

Answers sheets for specific exercises are often part of publishers' language learning packages. You can also make up your own. Be sure to include more than one answer when it's possible to have two or more that are correct. Crosswords and other word puzzles that come complete with solutions can also be in the self-access center.

2. TEXTS HAVE USER-FRIENDLY INDEXES

Indexes with multiple or parallel entries rather than cross-references are easier to use if someone isn't sure exactly what word to look up. For example, a book that lists "Tigers" as a separate entry under T and as a sub-entry under "Wild Animals" makes it easier to find "Tigers". If it were only listed once under "Wild Animals", you would have to know that phrase in order to find the page reference for "Tigers".

3. GLOSSARIES ARE PROVIDED

Reading material with a glossary is more accessible to ESL students. You could make up your own glossary sheets to accompany a subject-specific reading activity.

4. LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY ARE INDICATED

Materials that are color-coded or otherwise clearly organized in terms of levels of difficulty work well in a self-access center. An overly complicated coding system can be frustrating to use and may actually discourage students from working with the materials, however interesting these might be.

5. INSTRUCTIONS ARE CLEAR

If students are to work independently they need to know exactly what they are meant to do. One sample answer or a clearly labeled flow chart may be a more effective way of communicating what's expected than a detailed list of written instructions. Audio taped instructions help students whose reading vocabulary has not yet caught up to their listening and speaking vocabulary.

6. LEARNING IS PRESENTED IN SMALL DOSES

Activity cards and work sheets focusing on discreet skills, strategies or concepts make independent language learning more manageable.

7. MULTIMEDIA SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Corresponding audiotapes allow students to follow the printed text while listening to it being read. A person listening to one of these tapes with earphones on doesn't even have to withdraw from the rest of the class. Subtitled videos offer similar support, as do slide collections with accompanying audiotapes, and sing-along or karaoke type computer programs and videotapes.

Be on the look-out, too, for non-fiction with pictures, diagrams, tables, charts and graphs that contain information more easily accessed by language students than page after page of uninterrupted text. Computer software on a wide range of topics is also usually very accessible. Students can be using a particular program while classmates are working nearby on some other activity yet still feel fully part of the group.

Self-Diagnosis

When students begin to identify their own problems, they are well on the way to becoming independent learners. Providing opportunities for self-assessment, as suggested in Chapter 6, sets the stage for encouraging students to identify specific difficulties and to come up with strategies for dealing with them.

The following suggestions are for a session focusing on listening-related problems. Self-examination is helpful in addressing other difficulties students may encounter.

1. Prepare student questionnaires related to specific problems.

How can you make listening easier for yourself?

- a. Whom do you blame when you don't understand what people say to you?

_____ yourself?

_____ the speaker?

_____ both?

- b. What can you do when

– the other person is speaking very fast?

– several people are speaking at once?

– a tape-recording is not very clear?

- c. What else makes listening difficult for you?

- d. Do you sometimes stop trying to understand a conversation and just pretend to be listening?

2. Discuss the results of the questionnaire. List on the whiteboard the main points that are raised during the discussion, using headings that correspond to items on the survey. In this case, two such headings might be "Listening Problems" and "What to Do."

Listening Problems

– people speaking too quickly

What to Do

– politely ask them to slow down

3. Work with the group to develop a more specific list of language-related problems. For this session invite students to come up with things about spoken English that can make it difficult to follow, such as:

– You aren't sure what words like this, that and which mean because they refer to something else.

– People run words together so they sound like one word; for example, on thewayhome and Whatarewe going todo?

– People use short forms like would've and aren't.

At this point, you may address some of these difficulties immediately, or you may decide a more intensive follow up lesson on a particular point may be in order.

4. Focus on one or two helpful strategies. With regard to listening problems, recall and quick response strategies help people join in conversations. For example, tell the students:

When I say 'Stop', I want you to tell me the last thing that we just heard someone say." Or distribute cards on which you have written conversational one-liners such as "It seems colder today, " "The traffic was terrible this morning" and "What do you want to do?" Have students work in pairs, with one reading a card and the other having to come up with a quick response to what's read.

5. Invite students to consider possible remedies, by finishing these sentences.

It would be easier for me to understand what the science teacher is saying if I

I might be able to join in more conversations if I

Independence and Course Design

Finally, to what extent does the design of the language course limit or encourage independent learning?

At one end of the continuum teacher and student are working one-to-one without being limited by external examinations or other classes to prepare for; in effect they can plan the course of studies together. At the other end, boards prescribe ESL curricula that teachers and students are expected to follow as closely as possible. Somewhere in between fall various approaches to course planning, some more conducive to independent learning than others.

When working with adult learners, some teachers involve their students in planning parts of the course. Others find that in order to attract adults to the courses, they have to plan them in detail and state up front exactly what it is that those who enroll can expect to accomplish.

Added to this mix is the actual shape the course might take. Does it start by addressing students' most urgent communication needs and then move on to fine-

tuning their fluency, or does it take a simple-to-complex approach to vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure and so on? Is it linear, thematic, or cyclical in shape, or does it follow a matrix or web approach?

Even if students have little or no input into the actual planning of the course, you can still foster independence by giving them some sense of its overall structure and what lies ahead for them. Otherwise, they may feel adrift in a sea of disconnected activities that seem to have no obvious purpose or goal. Explaining the shape the course will take and showing a simplified outline, complete with objectives, can go a long way towards helping them assume some responsibility for their own learning. So can posting a calendar of scheduled tests, exams, field trips, guest speakers, and project due dates.

As with other independence-related issues, so too with course design: do everything you can to lead, not push, students towards assuming responsibility for their own learning. As I mentioned earlier, sharing with them a map of the journey towards fluency can only make the trip that much easier.

Assessment

When encouraging learners to take charge of the learning process it is perhaps only natural also to reward them for their progress in this area. Some teachers have experimented with giving learners credit for correcting their own work or for the quality of their peer-feedback. This can be a good way to get more reluctant learners on board.

A process-based approach is probably most suited to assessing learner autonomy. For example, you could reward learners for identifying their own mistakes in a draft essay. Some teachers successfully evaluate learner participation both in group activities in class as well as in online class forums; successfully working with others will gain a higher mark than learning in isolation. For teachers who take the larger step of giving learners a role in planning their learning or selecting materials, their ability to do so well could be acknowledged. Diaries and portfolios (see chapter five) can be used as a source for monitoring progress.

8. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

It's beyond the scope of this book to address all the cultural issues involved in second language teaching. Whether their students are refugees or voluntary immigrants, adults or children, mono-lingual or multi-lingual, all second language teachers must take into account the cultural backgrounds of their students as they ease them into the new language and culture. One aspect of previous cultural experience is schooling and, as we've already seen, students' expectations of what school should be like play a part in their response to the new classroom. The student-centered teacher avoids stereotypes, especially about students' their cultural backgrounds.

Cultural differences exist between students, as well as between teacher and students. Issues of religion, race, gender and childrearing are a few of the other factors that may be influencing your students' journey towards independent language

learning. These are issues that the whole school community must address. You are not alone in dealing with them.

Often colleagues, parents and other students assume that the trained ESL teacher has all the answers. You will find yourself in the role of advocate, having to confront racially motivated comments and incidents, and support students in their efforts to be treated fairly and respectfully. You should also be sensitive to bias in testing instruments and text books, and difficulties they may have in gaining admission to colleges, universities or work programs. All teachers and administrators should share your concerns, and work with you to combat discrimination or to mediate on your students' behalf. If necessary, you should also be able to draw support from school jurisdiction policies and guidelines on racism, sexual harassment, and bias in curricula.

The Classroom as a Forum for Cultural Exchange

Acting as a facilitator may be equally effective, especially within the classroom setting. By being attuned to your students' needs and interests, you can make your classroom into a forum for cultural exchange, with the focus on similarities rather than differences, and with the differences noted with appreciation for their rich diversity.

Consider, for example, what one teacher of adults in Australia did when the class learned of the death of a relative of one of the students. The teacher wondered if there was going to be some opportunity to visit the family at a funeral home. One student who shared the religious faith and country of the family indicated, "We don't do that." The teacher's response – "Oh, could you tell the rest of us what will happen and what would be appropriate for us to do?" – was the starting point for sharing mourning and funeral customs that was informative to everyone. The topic drew even the least fluent students into the discussion.

As well as being open to opportunities like this, you may want to initiate more specific explorations of cultural customs and norms. For example, you could invite students to comment on when or if they think actions like the following are appropriate:

- calling teachers by their first name
- speaking only when you are spoken to
- standing very close to a person while speaking
- shaking hands when meeting someone new
- eating in front of someone else without offering them food
- accepting food the first time it is offered
- staying seated when a teacher is speaking to you

Include some of your own culture's customs, too; students want to learn about their new homeland's customs, even if they may not approve of all of them.

Culture and Language

Depending on their ages and experiences, you could explore with your students other topics with a cultural component that impact on language usage. We've already referred in passing to behaviors like an unwillingness to speak first or not feeling right about asking the teacher questions. Intonation, body language, uses of silence and turn taking "rules" may also come into play.

INTONATION AND BODY LANGUAGE

Intonation patterns vary from one language to another. What may sound kind and confident to one group may sound patronizing or overly aggressive to another. Role-playing a scenario, such as a customer complaining to a store clerk about defective merchandise, or two people working together to assemble a puzzle or a bookshelf can help the class see that everyone doesn't sound exactly the same when saying the same thing.

Showing films or television programs made in other countries could convey a similar message. These sources could also give students insights into different body language cues that people use to communicate the same thing. Following a viewing of a film or a role-playing session, you could pose questions:

How did those two people greet each other?

Did you notice if the woman looked right at the man in the store?

Besides what he said, how did you know that boy was angry?

These questions help students see how "loudly" body language can speak and how it can easily be misinterpreted.

USES OF SILENCE

One culture might see waiting a few seconds before speaking as a sign of politeness and jumping quickly into a conversation as being very rude. There are also cultural norms that determine who may speak and who should remain silent in certain situations. Questions like the following could stimulate helpful discussion in your ESL class:

In your home country...

How long do people wait between questions and answers?

If you don't know an answer, is it better to remain silent?

Can children address adults whenever they want to?

Are there times when women are expected to remain silent?

When would silence be a sign that something is wrong?

TURN-TAKING

Some cultural norms may be fairly restrictive in terms of how long one must wait before speaking and how to interject oneself into a conversation, whereas others are less clearly defined.

One of us was meeting with a school principal and with a teacher from one of the ethnic minority groups represented in the school. Suddenly a five-year-old boy, from the same group as the teacher, rushed in, called out something to the principal and rushed out. The principal said, "It's great that he has enough confidence to talk at last." Later the teacher, who shared the child's ethnic background, said she was ashamed that he had interrupted the principal and a visitor in that way. In her view he was not being well prepared for the world outside where adults would not allow a little child to interrupt them.

Class discussions about turn-taking should include expectations about carrying on conversations, interrupting someone, delivering messages and asking questions in class, as well as parental or cultural considerations.

Broader Concerns

As a student-centered ESL teacher, you will often find yourself trying to balance your efforts to help students acclimatize themselves to their new homeland against their – and their family's – wishes. Explain to concerned parents your expectations for classroom behavior and the reason for them. Be prepared for occasional disagreements, such as the pros and cons of encouraging youngsters to ask why-type questions about concerns over a field trip, and about girls wearing shorts for sports.

In some cases, you may be wondering if you'll even see the parents at meetings. If you're teaching children or teens, do everything you can to make their families feel welcome at school. Send home bilingual invitations for home-and-school meetings, open houses, concerts and evaluation interviews. You could work with your students to prepare these, helping them draft and edit both the English and first language messages.

In some school districts serving large multicultural communities, interpreters are available to attend such events. In that case book their services well in advance. These people may also be able to put you in touch with representatives of various ethnic communities who would be willing to come to your school as guest speakers or workshop leaders.

Because there is no such thing as a typical ESL class, it's difficult to point to more specific cultural concerns. Two issues that are often debated at staff meetings are how much should be expected of non-English speaking students, and how much extra must teachers do to help them achieve academic success in their new school?

We know that teachers' and parents' expectations influence how students do in school. But some well-meaning teachers, concerned about the stresses of relocation that students and their families are already under, are reluctant to add to these pressures and delay drawing their students "into the swing of things" until they are more comfortable. Too much of a delay, however well motivated, may actually work against students' best interests. They may become confused about what is expected of them, especially in a less structured, student-centered setting, even thinking that some misbehavior or a lack of participation is acceptable. A sink-or-swim. approach

can be equally detrimental. It can leave students feeling they'll never be able to catch up with their classmates or frustrated because they can't demonstrate how much they already know about a particular subject. Unrealistic parental expectations can have a similar effect.

In dealing with situations like these, you may have to assume the advocate's role, helping subject teachers find ways to evaluate ESL students, and speaking with parents early on about what to expect of their children in the first few months and ways in which they can support their learning. In some cases, you may be the one who arranges consultations with resource persons who deal with the trauma of refugee experiences or assisting families in trying to adjust to new cultural norms.

Your students aren't the only ones who find it stressful dealing with cultural differences and concerns. Teachers may find it stressful too, especially if everyone else expects them to have all the solutions. Keeping up your reading of professional journals and attending professional development workshops will give you new insights that you can pass on to others. Bringing serious concerns about discrimination, bias and racism to the attention of administrators will elicit broader school-based responses. Being willing to educate yourself on those issues, and perhaps even to confront your own biases, will help you become a more confident second-language teacher, and a less stressed one.

CONCLUSION

Some might argue that student-centered teachers shouldn't expect teacher-centered students to accept an approach they or their families see as counter-productive. Wouldn't it be easier on the students if the teacher adopted a teaching style more in keeping with their past experiences? Possibly, but not if you believe that all students benefit from gradually assuming increasing responsibility for their own learning.

ESL students may only be called on to do differential equations in math class, but they must speak, read, write and listen in their new language in all classes and in countless situations outside school where you won't be available to encourage, correct or evaluate them. Supporting students on their journey towards independent learning is the goal of the student-centered teacher.

It takes time and hard work on your part to help your students see why you are doing what you do. But as long as you are willing to encourage them to ask why, soon you will not have to answer that question. Your students' ever-improving use of English will speak for itself.