

Independent learners

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What is learner autonomy?

Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's learning

It is the concept of knowing how to learn

*It is a capacity or ability that needs to be acquired -
learning how to learn*

(Holec 1981)

Our students always say they will practice at home.

- How do they practice at home? What do they do? What are the strategies they use to learn on their own?
- Do they indeed practice at home? If yes, how do you know? How do they measure their own success or failure at practicing on their own?
- If they don't practice outside the classroom, why don't they?
- Can they replicate or use the tasks they perform in the classroom to practice or improve their English without your help?

Training our learners

- Students need to **learn how to learn**.
- Students must be helped with strategies they can use outside the classroom in their daily lives to understand their surroundings.
- This means, what we do in class must be relevant to what they do outside the class – not just in terms of topic but how they process and understand information.

Rashida finds it difficult to remember new vocabulary. She sincerely makes a list of new words with their meaning in Spanish. She told me she tries to memorize them. This didn't seem to work for her. One day at the end of class, I asked them all to close their eyes. I told them to try and picture the words I say in their mind. If they didn't know what the word meant or were unsure, they were to look in their books. I told them I will pause after every word to allow them to do so. The following day Rashida asked me to do it again. Other students enjoyed the activity.

Maria struggles with simple comprehension questions. She can't seem to find correct answers even though she understands the text quite well. The following class, instead of answering the comprehension questions, I asked them to simply underline what they thought was important in the text. I drew bullet points on the board. For the first bullet point I wrote the first important sentence. I asked them if they liked this method of breaking down text; 3 out of 4 students agreed.

Vocabulary

Train students to:

- infer meaning from context, background knowledge, words surrounding it
- use the dictionary
- keep lists of prefixes and suffixes
- draw spider grams, columns, word maps
- make flashcards with words on paper or on a phone app like *Quizlet*
- look up words online
- use words in their own sentences
- explain words to each other
- think about where might they encounter a new word or phrase

Reading

Train students to:

- read for gist
- spot key words and words they recognise at a glance
- read quietly on their own
- pick out their own books/articles per week/month and report on their reading
- promote extensive reading

Listening

Train students to:

- listen for gist: understand the general context of the piece
- listen for connected speech: pronunciation work is key for listening

Suggestions:

- *Provide students with sufficient background knowledge about the listening text.*
- *Whenever possible, challenge students with a live radio listening and celebrate the little victories of recognizing even one or two words.*
- *Expose them to a variety of listening texts: different paces, accents, ages.*

Writing

Train students to:

- practice micro writing; taking notes, making lists, categorising, writing pros and cons, spider grams, point by point writing
- write creatively
- review and correct their own writing

Speaking

- Increase student awareness of connected speech
- Teach language chunks
- Work on intonation
- Provide them with good and inspiring examples to replicate
- Instant commenting for fluency: have students say the first thing that comes to their mind
- Simulation and role-play: let students suggest what real life conversation they want to simulate

Remember!

- Take your time when introducing learning strategies and techniques
- Patience and practice is key – for you and for your students
- Think about how a certain task can become more useful to learners outside the classroom
- This DOES NOT mean that course-book tasks are irrelevant; they play an important role in language learning
- Negotiate with students to strike a balance between what your students want to do and what you want to do for the class

In your classroom...

Who decides...

- content? What you do in class?
- how to respond to content?
- how and when to correct errors?
- topics for presentations or freer practice if any?
- what homework to do?

Is it you – the teacher?

Is it the book or curriculum?

Is it the students?

Giving students *agency*

When students have agency they get to make some of the decisions about what is going on and as a consequence they take responsibility for their learning.

- Jeremy Harmer

*It is important to give students a voice in **how** they learn and **what** they learn. – David Nunes*

When Samia comes to a word she does not know how to pronounce, she looks at the letters carefully, she breaks the word into syllables slowly, pronounces it part by part and excitedly says the word correctly, rereads to double check and continues reading. This reader demonstrates agency when it comes to figuring out the tricky spots in a text.

When Kim's son, Matthew, goes to the toy store and is disappointed to find that the Lego set he wants is not on the shelf, he will approach an employee and ask if (s)he can look in the back to see if it is still in a box in the storeroom. When it comes to advocating for himself, Kim's son has a lot of agency.

Content

- General topic of the class: what would you like to learn/work on today/this week?
- Choice of topic or units in the text book:
 - Today we can study units 1,2 and 3. Look at the units. Discuss and decide which one you'd like to work on this week.
 - Students can also look at these on their own. Then take a vote.
 - Discuss briefly with the students why they chose what they did.
- Choice within the topic:
 - Should we learn new words around this topic? Or actions (verbs) related to this topic?

Responding to content

Students can *choose* or *have agency* in how to respond to a text/listening activity. Suggest ways in which they can respond to content and let them choose.

- Make lists of new and/or important words
- Make a graphical representation
- Give a small presentation
- Write a summary
- Take notes
- Write a small dialogue around the topic
- Make questions about the text and quiz others (in pairs/small groups)
- Make true or false statements about the text
- Categorize the information into important/unimportant, present/past and so on
- Draw a diagram
- Make a flow chart
- Ask students if they like the text. Why do they like it or why don't they like it.

Error correction

- Ask students: When do you want to be corrected?
 - Every time you make an error?
 - After you finish speaking/writing?
 - While you are speaking/writing?
- Ask students: How would you like being corrected?
 - On the board?
 - In your book?
 - At the end of the class?
- Students can review and correct each other's work
- Error correction in pairs/small groups
- Using the internet/dictionaries for spelling and pronunciation corrections

Homework

Ask: What do you want to do for homework?

Give them suggestions and let them choose: Would you like to..

- Re-read the chapter?
- Make flashcards with new words and their meaning?
- Write your own sentences using the new words?
- Do the exercises at the end of the chapter?
- Write a short essay or summary?
- Write about your experience with the topic?
- Bring in more information about the topic?
- Discuss topic with your family/friends and report?
- Write a questionnaire?

Students can also...

- decide revision topics and how they want to revise
- decide if they want to work on a particular activity in groups/pairs or alone
- who they want to work with
- operate the CD player/projector
- write on the board
- decide how much time they want to spend on an activity/reading

Advantages of giving students agency

- Student-centered
- Differentiates
- Makes them responsible for their own learning
- Engages students since they do what they want to do
- Encourages them to take risks
- Challenges
- Raises awareness of their own abilities and learning processes – strengths and weaknesses
- Helps in critical thinking
- Brings variety
- Gives students a voice
- Promotes the feeling of achievement and self-satisfaction

Thinking about learning

*The more students **think about how they learn** the more they will be likely to take charge of their own learning*

– Jeremy Harmer

Students can **reflect on their learning** to **become aware** of what learning strategies work for them.

Students can fill out and/or discuss some questions (like the ones shown below) at the end of every class or every week to think about and reflect on not just what they have learned in the lessons but also about what they feel about it.

EXIT SLIP/Journal entry

What did I like/enjoy the most from this lesson?

What did I find easy in this lesson?

What can I do to remember what we did in this lesson?

What did I find difficult in this lesson?

Why was it difficult?

What can I do to help myself with this difficulty?



GOALS

ATTITUDE



IDEA



Motivation

SUCCESS



SUPPORT



PERFORMANCE



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