

# ENCOURAGING LEARNER INDEPENDENCE

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My aims in this paper are to look at what learner independence means and then to focus on some ways of encouraging it, developing the students awareness of what is involved and how to go about the process of achieving more autonomy. I will draw on my personal experience and the work we are doing in the British Council in Bogotá on learner training and fostering good learning habits.

Why is learner independence an issue? In recent years there have been many significant changes in society. Development of social advancements in the West tends now to be measured not so much by material wealth and consumerism, but by the improvement in the quality of life for the individual. One aspect of this is the concept of self-respect for the individual in society. Other monumental changes have been going on in Eastern Europe, there are also great moves towards a unified Europe in 1992, as well as the celebrations of the "coming together" of the Old and New Worlds in America, also in 1992. So, with this and the internal changes in Colombia, the *apertura económica*, for example, we can see that not only is English becoming more and more important, but also the role of the individual in society has been thrown into the lime-light. We, as educationalists, have to respond to these new challenges, and try to help the development of the individual. In teaching terms, this means developing our students' autonomy, and this means encouraging independence in our students which is also a very important life-skill which is transferable to many aspects of coping with and living in today's society.

## WHAT IS AUTONOMY?

Within the realm of language learning, autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981). This ability is not God-given in the sense that you are either born with it or not, but can be acquired through either natural means i.e. carrying out doing the activities, or by more formal, systematic learning. When we say a student is autonomous, we mean he or she is capable of taking charge of his or her learning. This is obviously an all-encompassing statement, and what is really meant by taking charge of one's learning is to be responsible for:

- negotiating/deciding on the course content;
- organizing one's work;
- choosing the method/approach and finding strategies for learning which suit you.

Obviously, students around the world and from within one society, vary in terms of cultural background, previous learning experiences, and the attitudes and expectations they bring to different learning situations. In an unpublished study of Colombian students at the British Council, Bogotá (1990), I found that there was no such thing as a model "untrained Colombian student". In terms of learner training, there was no definite pattern as to the range and sophistication of learning style. This highlights the fact that every student approaches his or her learning in a different way, based on previous learning experiences, knowledge of the world, and how well informed they are as to how best to go about learning. The implication of this is that every class profile is different and will have its own specific strengths and weaknesses, necessitating a different approach from the teacher when tackling learner training, and the gearing of classroom practice to the development of good and appropriate learning strategies.

From the four possible solutions above, we can see that the ways of helping our students develop fall into very different categories. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) divide these different types of strategies into:

Metacognitive  
Cognitive  
Social  
Communication

A definitive topology of learning strategies does not yet exist, but the above distinction is useful. What exactly are these strategies?

Metacognitive strategies are strategies that can be used to regulate learning, e.g. reflecting on learning, planning, evaluating and monitoring, and are generally applicable to most learning tasks. These strategies regulate the student's awareness about the nature of learning and may be the key to the learning process. We have found that in the British Council in our Young

Learner classes, that even young children have quite a lot of metacognitive knowledge and, as they develop physically and physiologically and accumulate experience, they improve in the kind of strategies and sophistication of strategies which they can describe, for example, from being able to assess their general language proficiency to setting short term aims<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>selecting what to work on next and how to do it.

Cognitive strategies are those more directly related to specific learning tasks and involve the students in doing things with their learning materials e.g. guessing the meaning from the context or predicting the content from the context and so on.

Social strategies are strategies related to both metacognitive and cognitive strategies, and involve students in doing things like role-playing, negotiating or joining a study group.

Communication strategies are those strategies that can be used to regulate the flow of communication, for example, asking another student to speak more slowly, checking that the message has been understood or being able to both keep discussion going and find out other people's opinions.

In order to begin to develop these different strategies, we have to think about how to train our students. We need, according to Holec (1980), two things:

1. a change in the psychological attitude of our students;
2. the acquisition of a number of relevant learning techniques.

Furthermore, it is important that our students can then make an informed choice, and select the technique that suits them best personally. The above solutions to the four sample problems work on different levels and all involve changing attitudes and acquiring new techniques. They overlap enormously e.g. when a student meets a new word, we can help him or her not to panic by previous discussion of reading techniques and reflection on possible reading strategies. Later, when discussing the meaning of the text or a lexical item, we can encourage the use of the necessary process language, i.e. the psychological and methodological preparation overlaps and should go hand in hand.

### 1. Psychological preparation

In this section on psychological preparation, I have drawn on a lot of the work that has been going on in International House, London.

For most students, building independence needs to be encouraged and developed, by working on the attitude of the students.

- i) Holec says that to change attitudes, adults may well need a 'deconditioning' process because they have fixed ideas about the roles of the teacher and student, methodology and activities, and what learning is about. It is therefore necessary to begin by finding out what ideas they have through discussion, e.g. "Do you think there is an ideal method?", "Can you only learn through a teacher?", "Should the teacher decide everything?", etc. Questionnaires can be used (see Bassano, 1986), example, "Which of the following activities are most similar to learning a language, and which are most difference? Give reasons."

- following a cookery book
- learning history
- learning math
- learning to drive
- learning to swim, etc.

This offers the teachers the opportunity to find out what the students are used to, and brings out the parallels and distinctions between learning languages and learning other skills and subjects. It also reinforces the idea that a language is learnt by practice and that an active, communicative classroom approach is needed.

- ii) Try to make students more conscious of their own learning processes by helping them identify their own learning processes, styles and strategies.

To do this you can use:

- a) Overt group discussion of different learning strategies. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) suggest providing charts, tables or grids in which students analyze the strategies they use, their degree of success, how often they use them, and their enjoyment. (I find a very simple self-rating scale from 1 - 10 very easy to use and it provides me with useful feedback).
- b) The materials in ELTJ 40/1 (1986) "Helping learners think about learning" by A. Wenden.

e.g. In Module 1, the students had to consider the origin and function of beliefs and then examine their beliefs about succeeding in college.

In Module 4, the students had to examine the beliefs of other language learners and relate these beliefs to different classroom approaches.

In Module 8, the students had to compare their approach with the approach of the model "Good Language Learner", and determine whether and how they will modify their approach.

- c) Problem-solving sessions in which they talk about their learning problems and try to find ways of overcoming them, possibly through the exchange of tips on learning. At low levels this can be done in L1 if it is a monolingual class.
  - d) Diaries in which the students can record the progress, problems, use of resources, organization of time, changing motivation, etc.
- iii) encourage self-assessment, for instance, by marking their own or each other's written work with a writing checklist as follows:
1. Are all your adjectives singular?
  2. Are they all BEFORE the noun?
  3. Have you checked any spelling you're unsure of in a dictionary?
  4. Are you sure the work you've written exists in English?
  5. Have you checked irregular verbs with your verb list?
  6. Are your tenses correct?
  7. Have you added the 's' to 3rd person singular affirmative verbs in the present?
  8. Have you put capital letters in the right place?
  9. Have you used paragraphs?
  10. Have you used correct punctuation?
- iv) encourage the students to take more responsibility in choosing the course content by negotiating the aims of the course perhaps in conjunction with the results of a Needs Analysis.
- v) encourage the students by developing their confidence in their ability to work independently of the teacher both inside and outside the class. This can also be fostered through pair work, group work, cooperative learning, project work, and so on.

The implications of this are manifold, but perhaps the most important is that it requires a change in the traditional role of the teacher. The teacher becomes an advisor who can discuss views on language learning and is able to give practical advice on how to continue the learning process both inside and outside the classroom, and after the course finishes.

## 2. Methodological Preparation

In order to encourage independence, the teacher also has to prepare the students to:

- i) Make use of existing teaching techniques (e.g. pair and group work) and explain why they do certain activities, i.e. take them into your confidence about aims and procedures.

- ii) Give systematic training in skills development, highlighting appropriate strategies.
- iii) Deal with study skills:
  - how to make and store notes
  - how to study/use memory techniques/revise
- iv) - how to use a dictionary
  - store vocabulary items
  - use a grammar book
  - exploit the coursebook
  - organize personal files

## CONCLUSION

There are many perceived problems in encouraging learner independence, including 1) the personality and previous learning experiences of the students, 2) attitudes of teachers especially with regards to moving away from "teaching grammar" and on to looking at the process of learning and 3) the existing educational system in Colombia. These, however, are not real barriers as the solution is to encourage learners to take a more active part in assessing their own learning, rather than waiting passively for instructions. The changes we wish to instill in our students have to be done slowly and gradually, starting with where students are and moving slowly towards greater autonomy. We, as teachers, must also be flexible, allowing for individual differences and giving the opportunity for our students to select what suits them best.

Finally, the implications for the teacher are just as important as those for the students. We, as teachers need both psychological and methodological training, and in all our materials design/production, lesson planning or syllabus designing we should bear this in mind, and make every effort to systematically build in tasks and activities to our teaching which encourage learner independence.

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