

**L**earner autonomy arouses mixed feelings. While some hail it as the only logical way forward, others regard it with deep suspicion, fearing it will put teachers out of a job or cause unmanageable chaos in the classroom.

But such fears are unfounded because autonomy needs teachers. It is not what takes place while the teacher slips out for a coffee. It is not a learning

# The road to autonomy

**For Jon Taylor the path to independence is not something students can embark on unguided.**

tank into which you drop students to see if they sink or swim. It might best be described as a road along which teachers guide learners so that they may make the most of the journey. Indeed, there may not be a final destination at all, in the shape of complete autonomy, as most students will probably always remain teacher-reliant to some degree.

## What is autonomy?

Autonomy is the readiness and ability to take charge of one's own learning. This involves skills and attitudes which are not necessarily automatic, and which, therefore, need developing. A certain degree of autonomy is always worth encouraging because it raises motivation and speeds up progress. It involves students reflecting on what makes an efficient learner and gives them the skills to become one, using the vast range of resources available to them as effectively as possible.

## What can teachers do to promote it?

Perhaps the first step is to raise awareness all round. Students can be encouraged to consider and discover the factors which are influential in language learning, while teachers can assess what their most effective role is. Needs analysis can be conducted so that the students' wants and needs have a chance of shaping the syllabus. Teachers can expose learners to study skills and learning strategies, such as how to keep useful notes and how to deal with unknown vocabulary when it arises.

Activities in class can focus on the topic of learning just as well as on any other subject. Students can reflect after class and evaluate activities and information, make comments, give opinions, complete forms or learner diaries, assess the extent to which their needs have been met and map out an action plan for future learning. The possibilities are extensive, but all along, the teacher needs to resist the temptation to do everything for them: students will never learn to use a dictionary if the teacher looks up all the words.

The following practical activities can easily be done in class to steer students a few steps in the direction of their own self-help capability.

## Analysing needs

A little effort to find out what students need or want before a course gets underway may pay dividends. Needs analysis does not have to be complicated, it could be in the form of a discussion or a checklist, such as the one below:

### Needs analysis

#### 1 How often do you use English in your everyday life?

- all day ☐ once/twice a day ☐  
once a week ☐ once a month ☐  
rarely ☐ never ☐

#### 2 In what media do you use English?

- Reading:* newspapers ☐ faxes ☐  
emails ☐ letters ☐ novels ☐ other ☐  
*Writing:* memos ☐ faxes ☐ emails ☐  
letters ☐ articles ☐ prose ☐ other ☐  
*Talking:* on the phone ☐ socially ☐  
in meetings ☐ giving presentations ☐  
other ☐  
*Attending:* conferences ☐ dinners ☐  
meetings ☐ lectures ☐ films ☐ other ☐

#### 3 What functions do you frequently need to perform in English?

- socialising ☐ negotiating ☐ inviting ☐  
greeting ☐ presenting ☐ agreeing ☐  
enquiring ☐ requesting ☐ interrupting ☐  
promoting ☐ describing ☐ explaining ☐  
complaining ☐ other ☐

#### 4 Which do you feel you need to improve? (Prioritise)

- grammar ☐ vocabulary ☐  
speaking/pronunciation ☐ reading ☐  
listening ☐ writing ☐ other ☐

#### 5 Which activities do you find useful?

- grammar exercises ☐ drills ☐  
reading texts ☐ tests ☐ games ☐  
songs ☐ drama ☐ discussions ☐  
dictations ☐ compositions ☐  
listening to cassettes ☐ other ☐

This could usefully form part of your opening lesson plan, involving discussion of this issue, which is, of course, directly relevant to the students' interests.

Be careful to ascertain if their perceived needs match their real needs, and make sure that your professional judgement is also included in any final decisions about the course.

## Raising awareness

### Five students

One way to sensitise students towards good study habits, without focusing immediately on their own strengths and weaknesses, is to allow them to appraise the aptitude of fictitious learners.

In the reading activity below, they are presented with a great many learning influences, which can be the springboard for pair or small-group discussion, listing the positive and negative factors. Following this, students can be invited to reflect on their own characteristics, rounding it all off with either a discussion of their perceived strengths and weaknesses or a piece of writing based on themselves.

### Find someone who ...

An example of a livelier activity is shown here. Each student circulates with a copy of the questionnaire and asks other students until someone gives

#### Questionnaire

##### Find someone who ...

- likes doing tests
- likes to be corrected when speaking a foreign language
- prefers writing to speaking
- can sing a song in a foreign language
- likes to know what's going to be in a lesson
- keeps beautifully neat notes
- prefers dictionaries to computers
- watches films in a foreign language
- stores and remembers vocabulary in pictures
- regularly revises what's been covered
- keeps a learner diary
- writes poetry in a foreign language
- likes to choose their own homework tasks

a positive answer. This person's name is then recorded on the handout.

Afterwards, students can be encouraged to examine the differences between them: learners may be really quite diverse even though they are in the same class. The advantages and disadvantages of certain practices, such as keeping neat notes, using diagrams or revising regularly, can be highlighted in discussion. Finally, students can write their own profile, based on their own individual responses and reactions.

## Handling resources

Few people would buy a computer or a mobile phone without finding out what it can do for them. It is our job as teachers to let students see how useful language learning resources can be, and to enable them to use them freely and independently.

### Discovery questionnaire

A guided tour of a multimedia self-access centre, accompanied by a discovery questionnaire will teach students what the software contains and how to access it.

### Dictionary quiz

The following quiz, based on just one page of a dictionary, can illustrate the wealth of information contained in reference books. Students may afterward be motivated to write their own quiz questions for each other, doing useful research at the same time.

#### Dictionary quiz

It's amazing what you can find out from a dictionary ...

**Meanings** What is an *autopsy*?

- a) a type of flower
- b) written permission
- c) the examination of a dead body

**Spellings** Are these correct:  
*august, authorise, auster*

**Pronunciation** Which syllable is stressed in *authoritarian*?

**Register** Which is more formal,  
*aunt* or *anty*?

**British/American English** What do Americans call *autumn*?

**Abbreviations** What does AA stand for?

**Grammar** Which is uncountable,  
*author, au pair, auster*ity?  
What is the plural of  
*aura, auxiliary, automatic*?  
What is the noun form of  
*autonomous*?

### Five students

**Anna, Bernhard, Caterina, Dávid and Erika want to take lessons in English. Who do you think will make the most progress, and why?**

Anna is a 45-year-old librarian. She is good at research, and enjoys reading anything from novels to newspapers in her own language, but isn't used to writing much. She was good at Russian at school, but she hasn't used it at all in the past decade. She wants to learn English to give herself a new challenge and also because she's planning to visit relatives in Scotland.

Bernhard is a 32-year-old businessman who needs English for his work. He is a sales representative in a large company, and he is required to use the telephone, write business letters, emails and faxes and attend conferences, all in English. He hated languages at school and the need for English in the commercial world makes him anxious. He is very organised with paperwork and is a competent computer user.

Caterina is a 21-year-old law student and she needs English for her degree course as well as in her future career as a solicitor. She has already been studying English for nine years and is at intermediate level. She spent three

months in London as a teenager and loved it. She has IT skills and is used to reading and writing a lot in English. Her record as a student is mediocre; her notebooks are a mess, and she often misses lectures and deadlines.

Dávid is 65 and about to retire. He has been working as an interpreter and translator for most of his life, specialising in German and French. He wants to take up a new hobby for his retirement, but is not very adventurous and feels safe with languages. Although he has never formally studied English, he has picked up quite a lot from his children (who all speak it) by noticing similarities to his specialist languages.

Erika is a teenager at secondary school and is being sent to private English classes by her parents. She would rather spend her free time listening to pop songs or in shopping malls with her friends. She loves her mobile phone, but dislikes computers. She hates it when her teacher asks her to choose her own homework or discuss what they should study. She keeps neat notes, but rarely looks at them until it's time for tests, in which she does quite well.

**Make a list of positive and negative factors in language learning, based on these case studies.**

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## Coursebook quiz

At the start of a course, it is instructive to conduct a coursebook quiz (see below), which can be done in teams if a competitive element is desired. This helps students to find their way around the book and reveals where the reference sections are and what information can be found in the contents page. Students are then better able to use the book on their own when required.

### Coursebook quiz

**You have ten minutes!**

- 1 What is the topic of Unit 11?
- 2 Which units are about telephoning?
- 3 Is it possible to read what you hear on the cassette? Where?
- 4 On which page can you see different examples of letters?
- 5 What useful reference section starts on page 123?
- 6 Are there any exercises to help your writing? Give a page number.
- 7 Use page 134 to find the past simple forms of *deal*, *withdraw* and *lend*.
- 8 Which unit covers indirect questions?
- 9 What pronunciation features are covered in Unit 5?
- 10 Is there a list of vocabulary in the book? Where?

## Giving a choice

Students may be more motivated if they are allowed to choose activities and texts themselves. This is because, once they've made their own choice, they may be more likely to follow it up and take responsibility for the outcome. Choice can be offered in diverse ways: which exercises to do, which questions within each exercise, which skills to practise, how long to spend on one topic, who to work with, whether to be corrected or not and what to do for homework. Students can also design tasks for each other – to great educational benefit, as this involves revision, choice and challenge, and gives opportunities for peer teaching and correction.

## Evaluating progress

Just as revision and recycling are essential to learning, reviews of what has been going on in class can keep students' attention on the direction to be followed in the future. They can be encouraged to express their opinions and feelings about activities and work

### Student self-evaluation form

- 1 I give myself the following grades for progress on this course.  
(Score 1–10)

Speaking ☐  
Listening ☐  
Reading ☐  
Writing ☐  
Grammar ☐  
Vocabulary ☐

- 2 My notes are:  
well-organised ☐ complete ☐  
clear ☐ OK ☐ messy ☐  
non-existent ☐

- 3 I review my notes:  
regularly ☐ sometimes ☐  
only before tests ☐ never ☐

- 4 I do my homework:  
always ☐ often ☐ sometimes ☐  
rarely ☐ never ☐

- 5 I speak English in class:  
as much as possible ☐ a lot ☐  
often ☐ a little ☐

- 6 I speak my own language in class:  
only when necessary ☐ often ☐  
a lot ☐ too much ☐

- 7 My favourite class activities are:

.....  
.....  
.....

- 8 I don't enjoy:

.....  
.....  
.....

- 9 In my free time, I practise English using:

videos ☐ TV ☐ radio ☐ cinema ☐  
theatre ☐ novels ☐ other books ☐  
magazines ☐ newspapers ☐  
computers ☐

- 10 The main difficulties I have with studying English are:


.....  
.....  
.....

done, progress made, and whether problems are evaporating or clogging the system. This can be done by means of discussion, reflection, learner diaries or forms like the one above. In this way, students may be able to see more clearly what needs to be done in future.



Implicit in many of these ideas is that the role of the teacher and student may change over time. The traditional perceptions of teacher as expert, instigator and administrator, and the student as passive recipient, are being remodelled, and sometimes violently shaken, to make way for other behaviours. If the student is being persuaded to take on more responsibility for learning, then the teacher needs to facilitate this responsibility transfer, becoming a guide, counsellor, resource manager and negotiator.

The change needn't be sudden or even complete: traditional roles may still be appropriate and desirable. Delicacy and sensitivity are essential, and resistance should be expected and tolerated. Learner autonomy should have nothing to do with teachers telling students what to think and how to learn.

Despite the apprehension it arouses, complete autonomy may remain a mirage on the horizon forever, but the road towards it is already quite well trodden and may become a superhighway before long. 



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