Helping learners to learn

Claire Gibbs trains her students to be more independent.

Teachers daily meet students with a wide variety of needs, goals and objectives. Students come to class with different expectations, motivations and, above all, personalities. Some attend classes twice a week but do little work on the language outside class, yet they are frustrated when they don't progress at the pace they would have hoped. Others have the determination to seek out every opportunity to develop their language skills but may not know the best way of going about this. Teachers can help encourage autonomy in their students so that they can develop their language learning outside the classroom. This brings benefits for both teachers and students!

In this article, I will give a brief outline of the benefits of helping students become more autonomous through learner training and then suggest some activities that teachers can use in the classroom to do this.

What is learner autonomy and why should it be encouraged?

Since the onset of communicative approaches to language teaching and learning, the roles of teachers and students have changed. No longer are teachers expected to control the whole learning process and pass on knowledge to passive recipient students. Nowadays, the teacher is seen as a facilitator and a guide who can help the students towards their individual goals and objectives, whilst the students, in turn, must take responsibility for their learning and their progression towards their aims. The ultimate aim of language teaching should be to help students learn *how* to learn and take charge of their own learning.

This involves choosing materials and evaluating them, organising a schedule and seeking out learning opportunities. It is being active rather than reactive, and from a Constructivist viewpoint it is seeking meaning from the input received. Learner autonomy is important because taking responsibility for one's own learning leads to higher motivation, which in turn leads to more likely success in learning. This success leads to confidence and further increased motivation.

What is learner training and why is it needed?

Helping learners attain the conditions necessary for autonomy through learner training can be extremely beneficial.

Marion Williams and Robert Burden define learner training as a way of *'teaching learners explicitly the techniques of learning a language, and an awareness of how and when to use strategies to enable them to become self-directed'*.

Autonomy requires certain things to be present: cognitive and metacognitive strategies (planning of studies and analysis of language and its use, respectively), motivation, knowledge about language learning, external support and a raised consciousness as to the importance of being responsible for one's own learning. Learner training (which could include explicit work on all the above features except motivation) empowers the learner and can lead to more successful language learning. Research has shown that attributes which successful learners have in common include an awareness of possible differences between the L1 and the target language, being involved in the learning process, interest in expanding knowledge, and awareness of what is necessary to learn a language.

What role can computers play?

Modern teaching benefits from access to a vast array of technology. This can be used in the classroom by teachers, or for self-access and study by students. There are many reasons why technology, specifically computers, should be incorporated into language learning. Firstly, it can be extremely motivating for the students. It gives a different medium through which to work, adds variety and can enable learners to make choices about the material and pace. It is flexible and can be adapted to suit the needs of individual students. In addition, it can be interactive and give instant feedback.

Most importantly, technology can support autonomy as students select and evaluate material. There are also many ways in which computers can be used for self-study. Online newspapers, radio shows, podcasts, wikis, blogs and webquests are just some of the possibilities. By taking advantage of the vast range of computer-based material, learners are using various strategies to plan and execute their language learning and, at the same time, enhancing their autonomy.

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The following activities are ones that I have used with students of various levels and which have given them ideas that they can adapt to suit their own personal needs and preferences. The activities can all be adapted to meet your own classroom situation and the language can be graded to suit the level of your students. Hopefully both you and your learners will get some benefits!

Activity 1 Ways to study

Aim
To make the students aware of the many forms that self-study can take and to enable them to choose the ways that they would enjoy the most.

Procedure
- Hand out the worksheet (see page 34, top) in class and tell the students to brainstorm ideas together in pairs.
- Elicit their ideas and write them on the board, adding any extra ideas from the 'Teacher's answers' box that they didn't think of.

- Ask the students to pick the two ideas that they like most and to try these first. They must report back in class the following week. This will be the start of keeping a record of study (see Activity 2).

Teacher's answers (suggestions only)

Things students can do outside class:

Listening
- Watch English films.
- Listen to English songs.
- Use the following websites:
  www.eslhome.com
  www.shambles.net/pages/learning/EnglishP/eslpodcast/
  www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish
  www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice

Speaking
- Speak to other English speakers.

Writing
- Email other learners or English speakers.
- Become involved in online 'chats' in English.
- Write letters.
- Keep a diary in English.
- Write essays.

Reading
- Read a newspaper or articles from it (online or paper).
- Read graded readers.

Pronunciation
- Listen to as much English as possible.
- Learn the phonemic script.
- Record yourself speaking and listen to your recordings.

Grammar
- Use your coursebook.
- Do exercises in a grammar book.
- Practise using new structures in your speech and writing.

Vocabulary
- Write words on cards with the translation on the back.
- Write sentences with new words in them.
- Buy a good dictionary.
- Draw pictures and label them.

General
- Find a 'study buddy' and practise together.
- Take advantage of every opportunity to use your English.

Activity 2 Record of study

Aim
To help the students organise their studies.

Procedure
- Explain the importance of regular study. Highlight the range of ways of studying as shown in Activity 1. Tell the students that by writing a plan and reflecting afterwards on their work, they can see their progress and determine which study methods are most and least successful for them.
- Hand out the worksheet (see page 34, bottom). Tell the students that they must complete this each week.
- Each week, have a 20-minute discussion between the students in pairs, in which they say how successful their study has been that week and the areas they particularly enjoyed or didn't enjoy.

Activity 3 Webquest

Aim
To expose the students to the wide variety of learning resources on the net.

Procedure
- Explain to the students that the internet can be a great place to find resources for studying English.
- Hand out the webquest (see page 35) and give them one week to complete all the tasks.

Williams, M and Burden, R *Psychology for Language Teachers* CUP 1997

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Ways to study

Think of ways that you can study or improve in the areas shown in the table. An example of each has been done for you.

Listening Listen to English radio (eg BBC World Service).	**Speaking** Use *Skype* to make group calls.
Writing Start an online blog.	**Reading** Read magazines in your interest area.
Pronunciation Use podcasts and repeat sentences.	**Grammar** Do online grammar exercises.
Vocabulary Keep a vocabulary notebook.	**General** Keep a learning journal.

Record of study

Plan of study for the week beginning ....

Day	Area of study	Work done

Notes

Webquest

Grammar

- Find some websites that offer online grammar exercises by doing a search for 'online grammar for esl students'.

- Write the names of three different websites which have exercises practising these structures:

  the second conditional

  ....

  the past simple

  ....

  comparatives and superlatives

  ....

- Which website do you like best?

Vocabulary

- Look at the following websites:

  www.englishclub.com/websites

  http://a4esl.org/q/h/vocabulary.html

  www.manythings.org/vocabulary

- Write down five new words that you learnt from one of the sites.

- Which site was it?

- Did you like this one best?

Reading

- Find an online magazine on a subject you are interested in.

- What is its name and what is the website address?

- What is the topic of the website/magazine?

- *The Guardian* website is *www.guardian.co.uk*. Find an article on it about your country.

- Give a general summary of what the article is about.

- Look at the following website:

  http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Reading/

- Choose a link and read a story or article.
  Which one did you choose? Why? Did you like it?

Listening

- Look at the following websites:

  www.eltpodcasts.com

  www.podcastsinenglish.com

  www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/multimedia/

- Which do you like the best?

- Listen to a podcast from your favourite site.

  What was the subject?

  What did you learn?

Speaking

- Set up a *Skype* profile.

- Chat online to other classmates.

- Skypecasts can just be listened to or you can join in and talk. Try one.

- What was the subject of the Skypecast you heard/talked on?

Pronunciation

- Go to *www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/index.htm*.

- What are the rules for pronouncing *the* in English?

- Write a popular English tongue twister and practise saying it.

Writing

- Write an email in English to a friend.
  Who did you write to?

- Go to *www.englishclub.com*. Look at the blogs, chats and forums.

- Which would you like to write on most?

General

- Look at the following websites:

  www.eslcafe.com

  www.learnenglish.org.uk

  http://a4esl.org/

  www.manythings.org

  www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/

- Which do you like the most?

- Write down three things that you used this website for and that you would recommend to somebody else.