LEARNER INDEPENDENCE

Terry Lamb explains the benefits of encouraging students to take control of their own learning

"Teaching should focus on developing the breadth and depth of pupils' competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing… (enabling) pupils to understand and communicate personal and factual information that goes beyond their immediate needs and interests, developing and justifying points of view in speech and writing, with increased spontaneity, independence and accuracy"

National curriculum in England: languages programmes of study: KS3

The theory

Biography

Terry Lamb

Terry taught French and German in secondary schools for 16 years and is now Professor of Languages and Pedagogy at the University of Sheffield. He directs the iPGCE, an online programme aimed at practising teachers around the world and he has published widely in the areas of learner autonomy and multilingualism. He is founder editor of the journal *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching.*

The term learner independence is often used in a broad sense to include two different, though related, concepts: learner independence and learner autonomy. However, much research and theory distinguishes between the two in quite a significant and useful way.

In research literature, independent learning tends to suggest situations in which the learner learns independently of the teacher. This may take place in different contexts, such as in university self-access centres or at home, using technology or other materials to 'teach yourself' a language, with the learner sometimes totally in charge of what s/he learns.

It can also take place in school contexts, e.g. task-based learning, or situations where the lines are blurred between classroom and out-of-class learning, such as encouraging use of mobile or other technologies to communicate with learners in other countries or to complete homework.

In such contexts the content may or may not be specified by the teacher.

So what do we mean by learner autonomy? We all know that some learners, if left to their own devices, will not necessarily know how to learn effectively. Some are not willing to learn independently or do not know how to decide what to do or how to organise themselves, and some struggle to complete learning tasks without asking for help. Herein lies the notion of learner autonomy; someone who is both able and (at least some of the time) willing to learn independently could be called an autonomous learner. In other words, it describes a capacity rather than a situation. Furthermore it

Above Learner autonomy allows more effective and focused use of technology
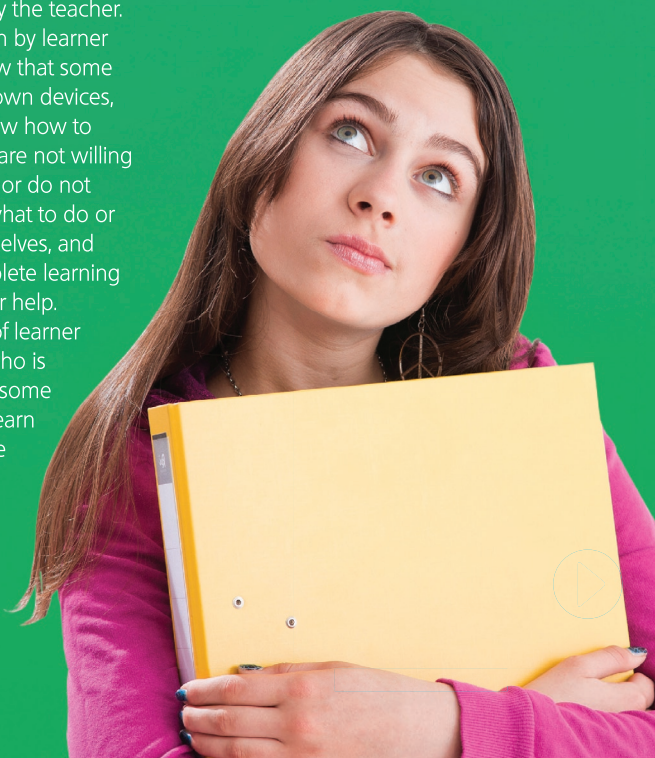
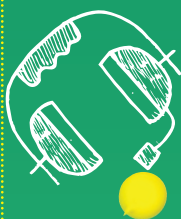suggests that learners cannot be independent if they are not autonomous.

Most teachers will at some point be frustrated by learners who seem unable to take responsibility for and control over their own learning – two key aspects of learner autonomy. The significance of understanding the nature of learner autonomy is that it helps teachers to think through what is needed to enable learners to become more independent.

Learners asked to work in groups on an independent task need to have knowledge and strategies that enable them to complete it without constantly asking the teacher. If they have a choice of tasks, they need to understand the purpose of each and how it might help them to progress. Learner autonomy could be described as the opposite of a need for spoon-feeding. Understood in this way, developing learner autonomy becomes more recognisable as part of the teacher's role.

Sometimes faced with the challenge of seemingly dependent learners we 'tighten up' our control, giving them precise directions. Yet responsibility and control go hand in hand and much research shows that we may be making them even more dependent on us and less responsible for themselves.

Seen in this way, it is clear that learner autonomy is important, not only in school but also as a capacity for lifelong learning. There are in fact many benefits, with the following being just a few examples:

- It is possible to meet individual learner needs if learners know how to choose learning activities that are relevant to them – we don't have to make all of the decisions for every individual, so it is easier to manage larger and mixed-ability classes;
- Learners can make more effective and focused use of technology;
- There is significant consensus in research that it has a huge impact on motivation – we all know that we are much more motivated to do something when we know what we are doing and why we are doing it.

The capacity of learners to take some responsibility for and control over their learning is of course constrained in most formal educational contexts, e.g. by the curriculum, resources, class size, examination syllabi etc. (Sadly the 14-19 Diploma in Languages and International Communication, which would have enabled learners to conduct independent learning in a language of their choice as part of the qualification, was dropped in 2010.)

Nevertheless, if we understand that autonomous learning is about knowing how to learn effectively, we can see that it is in fact a way of overcoming some of the constraints. Moreover, it can be interpreted in many different ways to suit the context and the learners.

Control over learning does not necessarily mean control over everything. Learners may not be able to decide on everything, as might be the case if they were learning at home to prepare for a holiday. However, they will be able to have some control, and often more than we believe.

As teachers, we may feel that opportunities for learner autonomy are constrained by the learners

themselves. However, research confirms that it is not something that learners either have or don't have, but a capacity which needs space to develop. They will be autonomous in different ways and to various degrees, so the teacher's support will need to be sensitive to this; support may involve minor interventions such as reading strategy instruction or advice on vocabulary learning techniques.

How then does the theory help teachers know how to develop their learners? How can they safely 'let go' so that the learners have the opportunity to 'take hold' (to quote the late Brian Page, the first ALL President)? Several frameworks can help learners and teachers to make sense of the big idea of learner autonomy and to plan appropriate ways of developing it further in our classrooms step by step.

Metacognitive knowledge
Person knowledge: Do learners know what makes a good language learner? Have they reflected on themselves as language learners, including their preferences?

Task knowledge: Do they know why they are learning languages? And do they understand the purpose of the various tasks they carry out, so they will learn how to choose tasks for themselves?

Strategic knowledge: Do they know how to learn, how to develop their language skills, what strategies work best for them?

Self-management
Planning: Are learners able to identify what they need to do in order to progress? Can they set realistic goals and plan how to achieve them? Can they find the tasks and resources that will help them and understand how to use them?

Monitoring: Are they aware of what they are learning and why? Can they assess themselves effectively and use this to plan their next steps? Can they learn from their errors?

Evaluating: Are they able to evaluate their learning and reflect on what they could do to improve it?

We often hear that traditional teaching methods work best and that active and exploratory learning is ineffective. Yet many teachers have experienced the limitations, such as when they realise that what they have taught has not been learnt or retained. We are also told that countries such as China and Singapore successfully employ teacher-centred approaches, yet national curricula in those countries and others are now requiring teachers to engage in developing learner autonomy, such as through problem-based and collaborative learning.

Many schools around the world have also developed expertise in assessment for learning (AfL), described by Black and Jones (2006) as providing "information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged".

AfL activities are found in many schools in the UK and contribute to the development of learner autonomy. Some schools have used a portfolio approach to recognising achievement in languages, such as the European Language Portfolio (**www.coe.int/portfolio**), which supports learners' self-awareness, reflection, commitment and ownership of learning.

Language Futures
Language Futures (**languagefutures. org.uk**) is intended to enable learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The approach originated as part of a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Special Initiative, 'Learning Futures', developed in partnership with the Innovation Unit. It was developed by Linton Village College as a prototype for a very different model of learning. It is not designed to 'teach' a language, but to equip students to be autonomous and informed language learners, supported by a school, home and the wider community. Students' learning is enabled through online learning, family support and mentoring with a foundation in project-based learning. Learners identify their own learning

needs, with support, and engage in problem solving and research as well as with a variety of resources to support their own learning. Motivation and engagement are key with learners not only choosing the language they wish to learn, but also elements of what and how to learn. The class teacher acts as a facilitator of language learning rather than a teacher of a specific language, by creating the conditions for students to manage their own learning and supporting them to learn collaboratively with their peers.

At Linton Village College (see page 15) learners even choose the language they wish to learn, planning the curriculum and content with the teacher, and then engaging in self-directed processes to achieve them, usually with at least one other learner. Learners can draw on a range of resources as well as personalised support and project-based learning: (**http://tiny.cc/LFLinton**).

At Gladesmore Community School, London, the development of an autonomy-supportive learning environment is enabling learners to develop their home language as well as new languages and to take part in authentic projects in the community, enhancing inclusion and wider learning opportunities (**http://tiny. cc/LFGladesmore**).
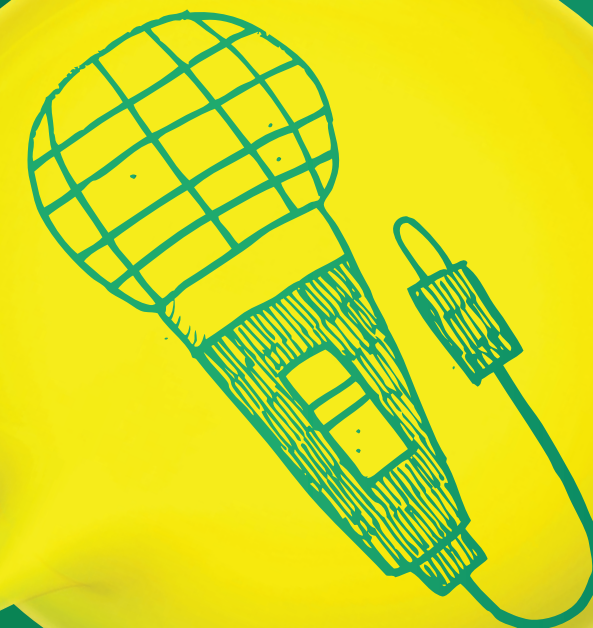
Above Autonomous learning aids retention and is increasingly important