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## Learner Autonomy

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Learner autonomy is a term which is sometimes misused and often misunderstood. When we say learner autonomy, do we mean self-study? Or do we mean something else? And why is it so important, why does it matter? Is learner autonomy something a teacher can help foster in the classroom, or is it something only the learner can influence?

This workshop will look at learner autonomy in the context of English language learning. We will discuss definitions, and its importance, before considering ways in which a teacher can help learners reach this 'goal' of increased autonomy, in the context of motivating materials from the Premier Skills English website.

**Over to you:** how do you define learner autonomy? Take a minute or two to think about this and write your ideas down, then discuss with the person sat next to you. Don't share for now – you will have a chance to compare your definitions later.

### What learner autonomy isn't

Some texts start by defining what learner autonomy isn't, and it is important to highlight the first of these three points in particular:

1. It's not learning a language on your own.  
This is not learner autonomy. This is purely studying on your own – which you may do by following a book, perhaps doing a language exchange with somebody else, or playing language learning games on the web. Learner autonomy strategies can help you study on your own, as we will see, but just following a book by yourself is not the same.
2. It's not studying online.  
The explanation here is almost exactly the same as the first one above. It's worth emphasising though as with an increasingly large amount of learning materials available online, it's quite common to make this incorrect assumption: using the internet = learner autonomy. It can do, as we will see, but just using materials online does not equate to autonomous learning.
3. It's not an approach or a methodology.  
Learner autonomy is more of an educational goal than an approach that teachers adopt in the classroom.\*

### So what is learner autonomy?

There is a lot of discussion and debate around what autonomy actually means in education/learning in general – not just for English language teaching. This particular definition is from Holec (1981): 'the ability to take charge of one's learning ... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning.' He lists the following areas of decision-making:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition
- evaluating what has been acquired

You may find many, many more definitions, but this is one which is often cited. It is also underlining the undeniably central concept: it is about the learner being pro-active in their learning.

**Over to you 1:** How close were your original definitions to these?

**Over to you 2:** The handout gives you 10 of 13 statements from Sinclair (2000) which constitute 'broadly accepted areas' of learner autonomy. Look at the statements with a partner and fill in the gaps.

## Some examples of learner autonomy

This is a chance to look at Sinclair's (adapted) list in more detail. Go through each area as a follow up to the previous task.

### **Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning**

This concept of willingness is very, very important. Without it, no learner is likely to succeed.

### **The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate**

LA is not natural. Learners generally don't arrive in our classroom fully aware of how taking responsibility for their learning can help them. In fact, in some cultures, it's quite the opposite and learners expect to be 'spoon fed'.

### **Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal**

If you think back to the definition from Holec, actually achieving it '100% completely' i.e. learners deciding direction, taking charge, is very, very unlikely...

### **There are degrees of autonomy**

Of course, some learners will take charge or be more autonomous than others. You probably know learners yourselves who are better than others at understanding why they are learning English, how they want to do it, etc. Also, in different contexts, e.g. at different ages, learners should be encouraged to use LA strategies at different levels.

### **The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable**

See above. And also, of course, there can be doubts from time to time even in a learner who is usually confident about what they want to do – this is its unstable nature.

### **Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent**

This returns us to defining what learner autonomy is not. As a teacher, encouraging LA is more than just saying 'OK, now go and work alone by reading this text and doing this exercise.'

### **Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious reflection and decision-making**

This again is something most teachers will see in what they usually consider as good learners: an awareness of the learning process.

### **Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies**

There's more to encourage LA than the way you teach...

### **Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom**

It's natural to think of LA strategies being used by learners outside the classroom only... but in fact, reflection and decision making can happen in classrooms too.

### **Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures**

As mentioned earlier, different cultures will have different expectations about how learning works: some will, for example, expect the teacher to act as the source of knowledge and director of all learning. Technology is loosening this a little, but it is still common across the world.

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## Why do it? Why is learner autonomy important?

As with definitions, there are many different answers available to this question. Recently, the notion of the 'lifelong learner' has been encouraged around the world as countries and multinational organisations with an interest in economic development recognise the link between improved educational performance and economic development: an educated population promotes development. The (idealistic) goal of a population of lifelong learners can only help that. Education doesn't just finish at 16 or 18 or 21, but continues throughout an individual's life...

Of course with the rapid spread of internet access, knowledge is increasingly available to greater numbers faster than ever before. This naturally is starting to affect the previously (and still in many cultures) dominant role of the teacher as the 'knower'. In reality, anyone with access to google can become a 'knower' in seconds. Helping learners deal with this new situation to their advantage is absolutely vital – taking charge of their own learning, finding autonomous strategies – a lot of these, as we'll see, are closely linked to advances in technology. (Reflection, which underpins it all, is the stand out exception).

Then there are learning theories which put autonomy at their heart. For example, a constructivist approach to learning encourages learners to share and 'construct' knowledge themselves, with support from the teacher.

Finally, research does show that LA strategies can have a positive impact on educational achievement – most notably from early teen years upwards. Academic research findings are now feeding into more real-life projects, such as this: <http://www.learner-autonomy.org/Home.html>

## How to encourage learner autonomy as a teacher?

So, learners can benefit from LA strategies in their language learning. How can a teacher help with that? Here are five ways:

1. talking to students about autonomy and its value
2. encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviours
3. getting learners to reflect on their learning
4. using activities in class which promote autonomy
5. setting activities out of class which promote autonomy

Adapted from Borg, S. & S. Al-Busaidi. (2013). Learner Autonomy. London: British Council.

**Over to you:** Now match the activities on the worksheet to these five ways.

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The teacher practices and approaches we saw can more be defined in a more practical way. Here are five strategies which cover most of those practices we discussed in the last part.

**Reflective activities**

Getting learners to think about their learning – what they want to achieve, how they can achieve it, etc.

**Learner training**

This might involve giving learners practical tools or ‘study skills’ which they can use in order to help them achieve their goals. For example you might encourage them to note pronunciation features of new words they record, or perhaps to record examples of the word in common collocations.

**Project-based learning (PBL)**

Project-based learning is an approach which enables learners not only to learn and learn about useful language, but also put that language to practical use in some kind of task or (of course) project. It is often referred to as ‘learning by doing’. Access to the Internet and digital tools has increased PBL’s relevance in today’s classroom.

**E-learning tools**

Online learning materials whether informal (i.e. following no particular syllabus) or more formal (i.e. following a syllabus or linked to a face-to-face syllabus) increasingly allow learners to follow the learning paths that suit their needs, their pace of learning, etc., something which is very difficult to do with a face-to-face course.

**Learner generated materials**

Why not encourage learners to create the kind of materials they want, or create materials which exploit the kind of content they are interested in. For example, a video or an online text may interest them – so why not get them to set each other tasks related to that video or text?

Do you use any of these? Can you think of other strategies that we could add to the list?

**Over to you:** You will now work through several tasks yourselves to consider those strategies for encouraging learner autonomy in the context of working with materials on the Premier Skills English website.