

What is it and why is it important?

Independent learning is “a process, a method and a philosophy of education whereby a learner acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for enquiry and critical evaluation” (Philip Candy, 1991). In a language learning context, independent learners are those who are able to recognise their learning needs, locate relevant information about language and develop relevant language skills on their own or with other learners. The responsibility for learning is no longer with the teacher but with the learner, who is more actively involved in decision-making.

Reviews of both literature and research suggest that independent learning can result in the following:

- Increased recognition of strengths, weaknesses and progress
- Increased levels of confidence
- Increased motivation
- Better management of learning
- Improved performance

It therefore appears that being an independent learner can be extremely beneficial for students, both at school and beyond. Learning is of course lifelong.

All of us can identify students in our classes who are already quite independent. They have a good understanding of what they are doing in their lessons and why; what their needs are and how to meet those needs. They build on what they learn in class by working independently outside the classroom and are able to achieve appropriate goals. However, many students lack the skills they need to be able to do this and need the opportunity to learn them with the support and encouragement of their teacher. These skills include cognitive skills (i.e. thinking skills), meta-cognitive skills (i.e. an ability to describe how they learn) and affective skills (i.e. management of their feelings) (Meyer et al, 2008).

Current best practices and methods

To help students become more independent, teachers can support them in a number of ways.

Make intended learning goals clear to learners

Sharing intended learning goals with a class helps students to see what they are trying to achieve and then later assess whether they have achieved it. Sharing goals can be done at the beginning of a lesson or series of lessons, or as a lesson progresses. They can be given by the teacher or, if the latter, elicited from the students. Note that they are described as *intended* learning goals. This is because teachers cannot fully determine what students will actually learn in a lesson. However, an intended learning goal can help students to understand what a desired goals should be when working towards an advanced level of English.

Help learners to personalise learning goals

This does not mean that every learner will be working on a different goal in each lesson but instead that they are given the opportunity to set goals relevant to their own needs before working outside the classroom or when doing tasks in the classroom. For example, before completing an exam task in a speaking lesson, students could set their own goal in relation to an area of weakness e.g. *In this task, my goal is to speak more fluently/use a wider range of vocabulary/use the third conditional accurately.*

Focus on the process as well as the goal

Learners understand not just what their learning goal is but also how to achieve it. Understanding what success looks like and the process they need to follow in order to be successful will provide them with a greater ability to achieve the goal.

Provide opportunities for reflection on learning

Self- and peer assessment of performance, as well as reflection on whether learning goals have been met, all help students to become more aware of their strengths, weaknesses and progress. Recognition of progress helps to build confidence and motivation. Opportunities for assessment and reflection need not take too much time. Just two minutes after a task or at the end of a lesson answering the question ‘*What can you do better now that you couldn’t at the start of the lesson?*’ can give students time to develop important meta-cognitive skills.

Provide feedback on learning

“Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and it is certainly something considered to be important in helping learners to develop the skills they need to become independent. Feedback does not only have to come from the teacher though. Peers can often provide useful feedback and suggestions when encouraged to do so in a supportive and sensitive manner. Hattie & Timperley suggest that for feedback to be effective, it must help learners to understand where they are now in their learning, where they are going and how to get there.

Gradually transfer learning decisions to students

Students cannot become independent learners if all of their learning decisions are made for them. Allowing students in a class the opportunity to make some decisions about how they learn gives them a greater level of autonomy. Start with small decisions at first, for example asking students to decide whether to:

- do a task alone or in pairs
- use a set of useful phrases for support or not in a speaking task;
- discuss questions about one topic or a different topic.

This devolvement of responsibility built up over time will help learners to become more independent.

Of course, as with any approach or strategy that you introduce, it is always beneficial to receive some feedback from learners during and at the end of a course to find out if they have been helpful. We could ask our students to rate the following according to how useful they have been (1=not useful, 5=very useful) or rank them according to which they have found the most useful (1=most helpful).

- Clarity of learning goals
- Self-reflection opportunities
- Ability to personalise learning goals
- Feedback on learning from the teacher
- Ability to make some decisions about the learning process.

Their ratings/rankings can then be a springboard for further discussion.