

## 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 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. *I'm going to use lots of vocabulary in my writing and check it when it is finished to see if I can make it better.*

### 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.

## How does Gold Experience 2<sup>nd</sup> edition help me with that?

Gold Experience 2nd edition provides a number of resources that will help you to develop more independent learners.

### Clear learning goals and models for success

Learning goals for each skill are outlined at the beginning of each unit in both the Student's Book and Teacher's Book. These describe what the student will be able or better able to do at the end of the lesson.

<b>READING</b> topic: unusual sports skill: identifying phrases with similar meanings task: multiple matching <b>GRAMMAR</b> present perfect past simple and present perfect	<b>VOCABULARY</b> sport <b>LISTENING</b> topic: enjoying sport skill: listening for the question task: multiple choice	<b>SPEAKING</b> topic: watching and doing sport skill: saying when you are not sure task: describing a photo	<b>WRITING</b> topic: a new sport skill: linking ideas task: article <b>SWITCH ON</b> ▶ video: top spin project: plan a campaign
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### An independent learning section

At the end of each unit is a dedicated section that helps students to become more independent learners. The tasks help students to understand the benefit of self-reflection and encourage them to give better feedback to peers. They help students – and you – to better understand themselves as learners. They also prompt a greater understanding of strengths and weaknesses which then helps students to set realistic, useful, personalised goals.

- 4** How would you like to improve your reading skills? Set yourself a goal and decide how you are going to achieve it. Use Ex 3 to help you.

### A focus on process

To help students identify good practice in speaking and writing tasks, the Student's Book provides model answers and tasks that encourage students to analyse the answers to better understand how to complete them successfully. Analysis focuses on approach, content and language. The Speaking file and Writing file give further tips on the process and how to achieve success in speaking and writing exam tasks.

### Improve it sections in Writing lesson

In each Writing lesson, the *Improve it* section helps students to review work and make improvements. Scaffolded tasks help students to develop the skills they need to do this effectively.

- 14** Read your story and follow these steps to improve it.
- Find the adjectives. Can you think of a place to add two more?
  - Can you improve on any of the adjectives (e.g. *nice* → *delicious*, *big* → *huge*, *good* → *amazing/fascinating*)?
  - Check the past tenses. Did you use the past simple and past continuous? If not, can you find a place to put them both in?

### Project work

In each unit there is a group project. These help the students to develop creative skills, and to make decisions about the learning process and how they complete the project.

- 5** Work in groups to research and design a new app that can be used by young people in your town or area. Follow these steps.
- Research apps for young people that already exist. Answer these questions.
    - What services do the apps provide?
    - How are they helpful for young people?

### Resources for self-study

There are a number of resources to help learners to achieve their goals. These can be used in class if the teacher wants to allocate part of a lesson to self-study or they can be used at home. They include:

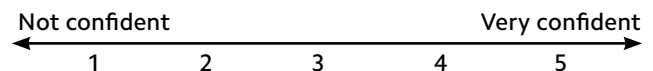
- A Wordlist at the end of each unit in the Student's Book
- An Extend Vocabulary section at the back of the Student's Book
- Speaking, Writing and Grammar file sections at the back of the Student's Book
- The Workbook
- Student Online Practice and resources
- Student's Practice App

## To take it further ...

Try these activities to help your students become independent learners.

### 1 Confidence scale

Write the intended learning goal of the lesson on the board (e.g. *understand main points in a conversation*) and draw a confidence scale like the one below. Ask students to note down the number that reflects how confident they are that they can achieve that goal now. Monitor and assess the confidence levels of the class. At the end of the lesson, ask students to assess their confidence levels again, writing the new number next to the old one. Again, monitor confidence levels. In some cases they might go down! Finally, ask students to work in pairs and discuss how they can gain further confidence.



### 2 Selecting the feedback focus

Before students complete a writing task, ask them to identify a personal learning goal, e.g. *I'd like to write a story with correct punctuation*. Encourage them to look back at your feedback on previous written work to help them identify this. Tell them to write this goal at the top of their work when they submit it and that you will provide feedback specifically on that goal when you mark it.

### 3 Record and reflect

Ask students to use their mobile phone to record themselves completing a speaking task so they can listen back and compare their performance to a model answer. Recording apps are usually free to download or are pre-loaded onto a smartphone.

### 4 Written feedback

When marking a student's work, provide one comment under each of these headings to help learners identify where they are in their learning now, where they need to go next and how to get there. Remember to highlight the progress they have made to boost their confidence.

*A key strength*

*An area to work on*

*An area of progress*

*How you can work on it*