Learner Autonomy:Notes From a TEFL Class

David O'Connor

This article will focus on the topic of learner autonomy. The first part of the article will briefly define the concept of learner autonomy and explain why it is important to help learners develop autonomy. It will then describe three types of learner training. The article will then describe two learning strategies which could be introduced inside the classroom to help specific learners to develop learner autonomy. It will examine the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners that the strategy would be suitable for.

The final part will describe two learning strategies which could be developed outside the classroom to help specific learners to develop learner autonomy and develop and sustain their learning. Like the previous section, commentary will be provided on the learning principle exemplified by each strategy and examine the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners described.

1. Defining Learner Autonomy

Henri Holec defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning (cited 1981: 3). Holec's definition noted that this ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or by formal learning." Like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), learner autonomy is student-centred (Thanasoulas, 1 citing Wenden 1998: xi). However, the teacher is not redundant (Thanasoulas, 1). Rather, the teacher should provide the tools by which learner autonomy can be achieved.

1.1 Why Learner Autonomy is Important

Learner autonomy is important because learners have diverse needs. Some learners like grammar, learning by rote and memorising; others want to speak; others prefer reading

---

and writing, while avoiding speaking. English teachers often come across the problem of learner motivation. This concept is also encountered in education academia. While learner motivation is commonly mentioned in teacher training materials, it is a not defined, concrete phrase. (Thanasoulas, 4.2) Autonomy, as a socio-psychological concept, is a human need, and so learner autonomy theoretically can solve problems relating to learner motivation. (Deci 1995, p.2)

1.2 Learner Training

Learner autonomy uses learner training in order to work. Learner training can be broken down into *strategies*. These go beyond the teacher offering students a list of strategies for them to use. It extends to helping students take charge of their own learning. Ultimately, this helps the learners become more independent and develop their own strategies (Borg p14). This links into the idea that students have diverse learning needs. The use of different learning strategies can assist with this.

Some learner strategies include the following:

1. *Auditory strategies*. These can include singing, repeating instructions and the use of drilling, or the use of authentic conversation in a classroom.

2. *Kinesthetic strategies*. These can include communicative cues such as body language, acting in a roleplay and the use of realia in the classroom.

3. *Visual strategies*. These can include visual material such as posters, cards and flashcards. It also includes storyboards and the use of images in a presentation (such as PowerPoint) to elicit learning.

These strategies develop learner autonomy in practical ways. The efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired *in* the classroom can be applied to situations that arise *outside* the classroom. In other words, the use of these strategies *inside* the classroom promotes the use of the target language *outside* the classroom. In this way, learning is a continuous process that does not finish when the class ends.

Nunan (2003) outlines a nine step program dealing with learner training and autonomy. These nine steps can contain elements of the strategies previously outlined. Nunan's nine steps are:

1. Make instruction goals clear to learners
2. Allow learners to create their own goals
3. Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom
4. Raise awareness of learning processes
5. Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies
6. Encourage learner choice
7. Allow learners to generate their own tasks

8．Encourage learners to become teachers

9．Encourage learners to become researchers

2. Learning Strategies

This article will describe two learning strategies to help specific learners to develop learner autonomy. In doing so, the students can develop and sustain their learning. This section of the article will focus on learning strategies that can be used *inside* the classroom. The article will provide commentary on:

- the learning principle exemplified by each strategy
- the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners that the strategy would be suitable for

This article will use a C1 level class as an example. According to CEFR, this is an advanced level class. From this class, there will be five students chosen as examples:

1．Gloria's L1 is Italian. She is confident and precise with her English.

2．Massimo's L1 is also Italian. He is assertive, confident and enjoys speaking English.

3．Fran's L1 is Portuguese. He is quiet, with good English, but he still makes mistakes.

4．Fatma's L1 is Arabic. She tries very hard, but she is not quite C1 level yet.

5．Daniela is Moldovan. Her L1 is Romanian. She is quiet and prefers reading and writing to speaking.

These students are from a class taught by the author in Ireland in 2017.

2.1 Learning Strategy #1: Make instruction goals clear to learners

Nunan's (2003, p196) first step mentions that the first step in giving learners a voice is to make instructional goals clear to the students in the classroom. By making these goals clear to learners they will feel more confident about the purpose of each activity. It will, in theory, therefore be clearer about why the teacher is asking them to do tasks. For example, in a class about likes and dislikes (like Nunan's example class was), the students could be made aware that the teacher is not simply asking them to talk. Rather, the teacher is asking students to think about the development of their speaking skills as well as giving them practice in using a range of language to discuss likes and dislikes.

The sample C1students can adapt this strategy so that they can create and actively participate in the learning experience. Returning to the class topic of likes and dislikes, for the advanced C1 level, a conversation class could be about different ways to express this topic and in what contexts do we use the resulting English. This would suit Massimo, as he enjoys talking and Gloria, who would be interested in different ways to expand her English.

Fatma may also find it useful too, despite being at a lower level. She shouldn't be bored with the class, and willing to take on the challenge, as she usually does. The instruction goals would be very clear, and benefit students of all levels and learning styles. The teacher can monitor what students are saying at all times, but otherwise allow the students talk among themselves.

2.2 Learning Strategy #2: Allowing the students to create their own goals

Again from Nunan (2003 p197), a typical CLT class can use this strategy too. Allowing students to create their own goals helps them to develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and encourages them to think about what they can do to help themselves and set goals to achieve that. Again, in the sample C1 class, this could be allowing the students, via an 'action meeting' at the start of class to choose a topic that they need assistance with. The teacher can guide and monitor, but otherwise the class will be a typical CLT class. The goal here is that the students will begin to think about setting themselves goals rather than leaving it up to the teacher to set the agenda all the time. This strategy can help Fatma because she can begin to think about setting herself goals so that she can reach C1 level. An example could be that the teacher will try to read more texts in English. Fatma can learn, or expand on vocabulary from these texts.

2.3 Learning Strategy #3: Dictionaries

Following on from allowing students to create their own goals, in some language teaching situations, student choice may be limited by syllabus, curriculum or even culture. To increase learner autonomy in a class like this, we could use strategies that offer learner choice, but are still within the remit of such a class

This can be done using dictionaries. The idea of dictionaries is that students are encouraged to use monolingual dictionaries rather than translation dictionaries. By helping learners use dictionaries effectively it can increase their ability to learn more independently. This can be done in conjunction with a reading activity. For example, read a dictionary definition and answer questions based on this. This may not be ideal for more active learners in our C1 class, like Massimo, but Fran and Daniela may appreciate it. They are more reserved and perhaps less confident with speaking up in class (possibly due to Massimo's assertiveness). However, they have a clear understanding of English and are certainly at C1 level.

The use of a dictionary could be expanded to using a thesaurus, for a learner like Gloria, who has an extremely solid grasp of English, and enjoys expanding her language. She enjoys learning, using and applying synonyms. The teacher could bring dictionaries into class, or use online ones. Merriam-Webster is a good online resource. The user can search for a word online, and it will appear with what kind of a word it is (whether it is a verb or

adjective and so on). There is also an audio accompaniment, so the user can listen to what the word sounds like. Finally, Merriam Webster has a thesaurus option, which is a useful resource.

2.4 Learning Strategy #4: Student Peer Review - Visual Strategies

The concept of peer review is entwined with learner autonomy. This means that students can review each other and correct each other's mistakes. This greatly reduces the teacher's presence and can give the students more confidence and autonomy in error correction, which is an essential feature of any English class. For an advanced class, using visual strategies could allow students to teach each other, with the teacher monitoring and assisting when needed. For example, the students could present a video and attempt to teach their fellows about the video content. For this article's sample C1 class, the teacher could assume that Massimo might enjoy correcting his fellow students. The teacher would occasionally need to step in and make sure that the groups are not dominated by such a competent student. The teacher should also be aware to not single Massimo out from the others much, too. Rather, mixing the groups between the more confident students and the quieter students, like Fran and Daniela, might be the most effective way to utilise this strategy.

2.5 Learning Strategy #5: Student Peer Review - Kinesthetic Strategies

Related to Learning Strategy #4, a kinaesthetic approach can be used in the classroom, rather than a visual approach. This could be almost a 'show and tell' style presentation of the students' choice. The students could use realia to do this. Again, the teacher can monitor and assist when needed. This strategy is very similar to the previous strategy in that it is very visual, and that dominant or proficient students shouldn't be allowed too much time at the expense of the rest of the class. Students like Fatma might find this approach to be a good one. She tries very hard in every class, so allowing her to choose something that she's interested in and allowing her to present in whatever style she chooses could help her with her English. Another benefit is that this strategy could increase her confidence with the language. For Fatma, her goal is achieving C1 level, and so strategies like this will be useful in overcoming current obstacles to her fluency.

3. This article will now focus on learning strategies that can be used *outside* the classroom.

Like section 2, there will be commentary on:
- the learning principle exemplified by each strategy
- the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners that the

strategy would be suitable for

3.1 Learning Strategy #1

CLT and learner autonomy heavily encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom (Nunan p198). Inside the classroom, the class should present conversations and situations using authentic language. For example, open ended roleplays putting learners in authentic situations. These can be simplified at lower levels, but realistically this probably cannot work beyond intermediate level English. For the confident C1 speakers in the example class, they could even suggest situations that they will prepare for in class, with the aim of using the language outside the classroom. Effective roleplay topics to be used outside the classroom could be real roleplay using current news topics. Care should be taken with this however, as many current news topics are country-specific. Even European-centric topics would exclude Fatma, who comes from a completely different culture. While caution should be exercised, getting the students to become used to discussing current events uses authentic language, and could greatly help them with their conversations in English outside of class.

3.2 Learning Strategy #2: Encourage learners to become the researcher

Nunan's ninth step (p202) had students going outside the classroom to research what language they encountered. This class has an incredible range of topics to choose from and their language knowledge would be more than sufficient to find something they're interested in and going out to research it. For example, a task could be exploring a tourist tour in Dublin, Ireland. They could go out, get and compare brochures and summarise the different tours on offer, or they could even go on the tours themselves and explain to their friends and peers what the different tours offer. Students would be out in Dublin city and doing research for themselves. The resulting questions that they bring into class would be individual and unique. This would also encourage more reserved students, such as Fran or Daniela, to be more outgoing and explore English outside the class for themselves. Fatma faces a different challenge in that she may not be able to vocalise as effectively, but her enthusiasm would compensate for much of this. She is outgoing and friendly, so she might enjoy working outside of class like this.

Their results may be recorded using video or audio and anything that they don't understand can be noted and later checked with the teacher. This can then be discussed inside the class. This could suit Daniela and Fran, who may find it easier to record and study themselves. Fatma may also find a personal copy of recorded material useful to listen and practise in her own time. This approach could potentially be used at intermediate levels.

3.3 Learning Strategy #3: Reading a newspaper, or a book

Outside the class, the students can find a newspaper that they enjoy reading. They can choose reading passages in class to discuss. This can be explored in different ways. Do the learners buy the same papers every day? Why don't the students try a different one? This can lead to a classroom debate, using outside sources. This could be expanded, particularly at the advanced C1 level, to students going beyond newspapers and choosing other pieces of literature. They could choose a topic raised by their literary piece, thus giving them a choice and responsibility of what they wish to learn. The teacher would not be involved with the choice. The students can then discuss what they chose outside of class, and present in a future class. The teacher can monitor and aid students with specifics, but otherwise the students will be presenting their reading material to their peers. Again, especially advanced students like Massimo may find this less interesting, as he is more speaking-focused. But on the other hand, offering a choice in what will be read and therefore talk about, could be an appropriate strategy. Gloria may enjoy this, as very often books and newspapers use different or unusual vocabulary which she may wish to add to her word bank.

3.4 Learning Strategy #4: Joining a local library

Staying with a reading strategy, the students can go out and join a local library. Time in class is limited and this will help learners to take more responsibility for their own studies. They can use library facilities to study things that are of particular interest to them in more depth, making the most of their time and setting personal goals. This will be particularly useful to Fran as he doesn't attend many classes in English as he says he can't afford to pay for more and he spends a lot of time with Portuguese speakers - going to a library and borrowing books to read in English or borrowing listening material will give him more exposure to English and it's often free. They can describe and discuss services their local library provides and what they use. Other institutions, such as schools, universities and embassies have English language facilities.

3.5 Learning Strategy #5: Going to a movie in your target language

This visual strategy can be challenging, even for advanced students. Many movies in the cinema are not subtitled, and it might be interesting if several students from the same class went out and saw the same movie and talked about what difficulties they faced. In our class example, the differences between the Italian students and Fatma from Saudi Arabia could be very different. This goes beyond solely English level, but also what difficulties their L1 gives them with English. The students can go out and do the work, while the teacher can see what difficulties the students faced in class. If the class saw the movie together, the students could also discuss what they saw and peer review each other, too.

Conclusion

This article explored implementing learning strategies in relation to the development of student learner autonomy. These learning strategies can be developed inside the classroom, and can enhance and develop student education outside the classroom. The article was a summary of observations from a mixed TEFL class that the author taught in Dublin, Ireland.. The class was mixed in English ability and had a mixture of different international students.

The article examined the concept of learner autonomy and explained why it is important to help learners develop autonomy. It then described different types of learner training. It also described learning strategies which could be introduced and developed inside the classroom to help specific learners to develop learner autonomy. In doing this, the students will develop and sustain their learning. This article also provided brief commentary on the learning principle exemplified by each strategy. It examined the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners that the strategy would be suitable for.

Finally, the article described learning strategies which could be introduced and developed outside the classroom to help specific learners to develop learner autonomy and develop and sustain their learning. Like before, this section provided commentary on the learning principle exemplified by each strategy and examined the rationale for each strategy with reference to the specific learners described.

There are a host of reports, dissertations, academic reports and online posts regarding the concept of learner autonomy. Yet, in the field of education, learner autonomy is a relatively new academic field of research, having only been seriously studied since the 1980s. The rise of the internet has changed this field even more. It is the author's hope that these notes will add to this ever growing, yet exciting field of research.

Appendix

I

CEFR level	MEXT benchmark
C1	
B2	English teachers
B1	High school graduates
A2	High school graduates
A1	Junior high school graduates

Source: The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT)

References

Borg, S. (with Al-Busaidi, S.), 2012. *Learner Autonomy: English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices.* University of Leeds, The Language Centre, Sultan Quaboos University, Oman. Available from: https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/research-publications/research-papers/learner-autonomy-english-language-teachers-beliefs-and-practices [last accessed 02/16/2020]

Deci, E. (with R. Flaste), 1995: *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation.* New York: Penguin.

Holec, H. 1981. *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning.* Oxford: OUP.

Nunan, D. 2003. *Nine Steps to Learner Autonomy.* Available from: http://www.andrasprak.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.84007.1333707257!/menu/standard/file/2003_11_Nunan_eng.pdf [last accessed 02/16/2020]

Thanasoulas, D. *What Is Learner Autonomy and How Can It Be Fostered?* The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 11, November 2000 Available from: http://iteslj.org/ [last accessed 02/16/2020]

Wenden, A. 1998. *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy.* Great Britain: Prentice Hall.