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INDEPENDENT WORK IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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The paper deals with independent work in learning English. Independent work is a gradual, individual and never-ending process of self-discovery. It is a process, which learners gradually discover what independence is. Independent learners act independently and in cooperation with others, participate actively in social processes of their learning, interpret new information according to their background knowledge, know exactly how to learn and how to reflect critically on the process of learning.

The concept of independent work is difficult to define properly. This difficulty refers to two related assumptions: one is related to degrees of independence and the other one is related to the behavior of independent learners that takes different forms according to their age, how far they have progressed with learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on [2, p. 63-80].

The most famous definition of autonomy is Holic's [1, p. 13-29]. He defines autonomy as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning. By taking charge of one's own learning, learners hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of the learning, they determine the objectives, contents and progression and select methods, and techniques to be used. They monitor the procedure of acquisition properly and evaluate what has been acquired. According to Holic, this capability is an inborn ability and must be acquired by natural means or by formal learning. In this definition, the social aspect of learning is neglected. Dam indicates that autonomous learners want to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person. In other words, the concept of autonomy encompasses collaboration and interdependence [2, p. 63-80]. Little states that "learner autonomy is not a methodology or simply self-instruction. It is an educational goal and it is an interactive and social process" [6, p. 329-345].

As a whole, many researchers take independent work as an attribute of the learner. For example, little states that "independence is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action". Nevertheless, some others regard independence as a situation. For example, Dickinson (1987) asserts that "independent learners are responsible for all decisions on their own learning and the implementation of those decisions.

Independent work should be viewed from multiple perspectives, e. g., technical, psychological, socio-cultural and political-critical [2, p. 63-80]. According to Benson the concept of independence is context dependent. It can take different forms for different individuals in different contexts and situations. Little declares that the autonomous learner "will develop a ... psychological relation to the process and content of his learning ... displayed both in the way he or she learns and ... transfers what has been learned to wider contexts".

In his model, Littlewood based the word "independence" on three interrelated areas: independence as a student, independence as a communicator, and independence as a person. To be independent in these areas, he argued that students must have the ability and desire. Ability depends on having knowledge of the available alternative choices and the skills to make those choices. Readiness depends on the motivation and confidence of the student to take responsibility for the necessary choices. All these four components must be present together. Therefore, motivation, confidence, skill, and knowledge are essential for all the three types of independence. Each of these three areas depends on different criteria. To be independent, students must be able to work independently and use appropriate strategies. To be independent as an individual, students must be able to create personal learning contexts and express their personal meaning, as well as be independent as a communicator; the student must have linguistic creativity and use appropriate communication strategies.

Benson and Voller related the word of autonomy to five different concepts:

1. The situation in which students study on their own.
2. An inborn capacity, which is supported by institutional situation.
3. The learner's responsibility for their own learning.
4. The learner's right to determine the direction of learning.
5. A set of skills, which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.

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Benson states that independence is not synonymous with self-instruction, 'self-access', 'self-study', and 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning'. He asserts that "These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by oneself, whereas autonomy refers to the abilities and attitudes (or whatever we think the capacity to control one's own learning consists of". In other words, learning in isolation is not the same as the ability to direct one's own learning. Benson states that not only there is not necessary condition between independence and self-instruction but also self-instruction may hinder autonomy. He emphasizes the presence and contribution of the teacher towards the smooth progress of the process while preceding control to the learners.

Independent work is a gradual, individual and never-ending process of self-discovery. A person gradually discovers what independence is during a process. Independent learners act independently and in cooperation with others, participate actively in social processes of their learning, interpret new information according to their background knowledge, know exactly how to learn and how to reflect critically on the process of learning. They can make correct decisions during the process of learning, act independently when it is necessary and develop this knowledge to real life situation.

As it is important for learners to be in command of a rich and personalized repertoire of language learning strategies and for their teachers to guide the learners in their development, it is useful to go beyond the well-known categorization of strategies as cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social. Another helpful distinction is between language learning and communication strategies, the latter "referring to strategies for using the language that has been learned, however incompletely" [6, p. 136-150]. In addition, strategies can be classified according to the skill area to which they relate. The authors give a brief sampling of these strategies from which I quote the part, referring to vocabulary, as these strategies cross-cut the four basic skills, i.e., the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing:

The success in language learning depends on the learners. The learners may think that some people are just 'good at languages', but the greatest factor in learners' success is how much effort they are prepared to put in and how effectively they can learn to direct that effort. In this section, the learners will find a lot of ideas on how to improve language skills.

This advice will help the learners:

- a) to tackle the set tasks during a language course;
- b) to develop language skills through independent learning outside the classroom. Reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses will help learners to focus the effort on where it will most benefit them. Effective independent study will improve both individual skills and overall performance, and it will also increase enjoyment of language learning.

Anyone can become a good language learner. A number of studies have tried to define the characteristics which contribute to good language learning, and the consensus of opinion is that good language learners:

- are self-reliant, ready to work independently and take charge of developing aspects of their own learning;
- to be motivated and enthusiastic;
- have a positive view of the target language and its culture;
- play an active part in class activities (and language-learning activities outside class);
- are not afraid of making mistakes;
- practice as much as they can.

The above said is mentioned several times in the ideas below. It may not be easy at first, but thinking in a foreign language is worth cultivating as a vital skill which will improve all areas of language learning. To help learners think in the target language, carry on a dialogue with them in that language, for example,

- walking along the street, sitting on a bus, taking a break from other studies, whenever a learner can,
- comment on what a learner can see or what they have done today, for example,
- summarize the main points of a topic a learner has studied recently.

As the learners' knowledge of the language progresses and the vocabulary grows, they will find that they can say more and more. The sense of achievement which the learner will have, will boost the motivation and encourage further study.

The idea of independent work in learning is based on the assumption that knowledge is not simply transmitted and acquired, but it involves the active construction of meaning by individual participants in the learning process, it happens in social interaction with others, and it is co-constructed. As it is impossible to teach everything learners need to know, and given that learning does not stop outside the classroom, it is necessary to teach skills they can transfer to other learning situations. Although teaching clearly contributes to learning, learners themselves are the agents of their own learning. The increase in their involvement in the process of

learning leads to more effective learning. As Little views it, "all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous" [4, p. 431].

Here are some ideas of developing the four language skills:

Speaking skills:

1. Fluency and confidence come primarily from practicing your speaking. Talk to a fellow student over coffee, talk to native speakers if you have the opportunity (conversation groups, if available, can be very helpful – check the SACLL website in the spring term), learn poems or songs in the target language. Take every opportunity you can to speak, and have fun!

2. When speaking, try to find a balance between fluency and accuracy.

You should of course aim for accuracy, particularly with certain aspects of the language such as tenses where, if you make a mistake, what you say may not make sense. However, it is also important to aim for fluency (as far as possible at your stage of learning), so do not let worrying about more minor points of grammar that cause you to hesitate unreasonably. Try to keep the conversation going!

3. Saying things in different ways.

The most frequently-encountered problem in speaking is coming up against some vocabulary or a structure which you 'don't know how to say' in the language. This often happens when you try to translate something from your own language word for word into the target language. Practice re-phrasing, altering what you were about to say so that its structure is more simple and uses vocabulary you know. As your language studies progress and you start to think in the target language, you will find this easier.

4. Pronunciation and intonation. To improve these, work with, for example, the CD that goes with your course book. Break a passage down into short sections such as a phrase or sentence and repeat each section after you hear it, trying to reproduce the pronunciation and intonation as exactly as you can. Try recording what you say on your mp3 player and compare it to the original recording. This will help to train your ear and improve both pronunciation and intonation.

5. Spoken presentations.

When preparing for a spoken presentation, practice speaking from bullet points rather than a full script and, when you are practicing, speak to an imaginary audience. This will help you to keep your intonation lively and natural. A script 'read aloud' often sounds flat and unnatural and lacks conviction.

Listening skills:

1. Listening skills are needed in a variety of situations e.g. listening to native speakers in real life situations, watching films or the television, listening to the radio or CDs, listening to other students in class or to your tutor. A conversation always consists of listening as well as speaking. Listening effectively helps you to respond appropriately.

2. Be aware of what you are listening for. In a general conversation or when listening to the radio you might listen in order to grasp the gist (the general idea), whereas in a specific situation such as asking about train departure times you would need to listen for specific information. It is often easier to listen for the answer to a specific question since you already have an expectation of the kind of answer you may get.

3. 'Help! You are talking too fast!' Try to learn a variety of phrases in the target language so that you can politely explain that you have not yet understood, or ask the speaker to speak more slowly, to repeat what he or she has just said etc.

4. Listening to recorded material. When listening to recorded material, gather as much information as possible from the context and the introduction, so that you can make some initial assumptions about the content of the passage.

5. Take note of the tone of voice used by the speakers, or their intonation, as further clues to meaning.

6. Listen to the whole passage first, to get the gist and check your assumptions, then listens to it in shorter sections.

Vocabulary skills:

Visualize: some people who find it useful to have a visual stimulus write the new vocabulary on post-its and stick them around the room, so that they see (and say) the words frequently.

Listen: Others record the words and play them when, for example, they are walking or travelling, repeating what they hear.

Using cards: It can be effective to write a small amount of vocabulary on a number of index cards; each amount of vocabulary feels manageable, and the cards can be kept in a box, added to and revisited regularly to revise. Categorise your vocabulary according to topics.

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Revise.

It is very important to revise as much vocabulary as possible on a regular basis. Frequent short sessions of vocabulary learning, revisiting what you have learnt and adding new words and phrases, are more effective than occasional long sessions.

Define your goals.

Learn a certain number of phrases or words associated with a topic per day or study session, and try to stick to your plan.

Which aspects of the word do you need to know?

When you learn a word, you should also learn whatever you need to know about it, e.g. its gender or plural, depending on the language. It can be helpful to learn the word not only as an individual unit but as part of a sentence, to give it context. So write out the sentence where you came across the word as well as the word itself and learn them both. This will help to increase your vocabulary further by learning the associated words.

Active and passive vocabulary.

Since it may appear daunting to have large amounts of vocabulary to learn, distinguish between active use (in speaking and writing) and passive (receptive) use or recognition (in listening and reading). Your receptive store of vocabulary will be larger than your active store. You need to have more accurate knowledge of your active store.

Use your new vocabulary actively!

Talk to another student (or your mp3 player!) about the topic whose vocabulary you have been studying, or write a short piece about it.

Reading skills:

Always read with a purpose. Which information are you looking for?

Look carefully at a question or task. It's easier to read the text if you have a focus for your reading.

Use context clues.

What is the title? Are there pictures and/or sub-titles, which can give you clues and help you to predict the content of the passage?

Skimming and scanning (reading for general understanding and for detailed understanding)

Skim through the passage without a dictionary to pick up the general gist, then, scan it to extract specific information. Try to guess words from their formation or their similarity to words in your own language (although be careful, this can be misleading). Read through the passage again, highlighting any real problems. Now that you have made a general assumption about at least some of the meaning of the passage, you can reach for your dictionary. You do not have to look up or understand every single word; try to evaluate which words are the most important for your understanding

Use grammatical clues to help your understanding, such as tenses. Look at the shape of the sentence. Where are the verb and the subject?

Read as many authentic texts as you can. Easy and more difficult readers can be found in SACLL and the library. Look at the SACLL website there are lists of reading resources in several languages on the website, with indications of the levels of language involved. Read newspapers, books, magazines. Pick out something which interests you, and make reading a pleasure!

Writing skills:

1. The secret of successful writing in a foreign language is not to formulate it in your mother tongue and then to try to translate it. This can lead to awkwardness, clumsy style and errors. As you learn to think in the target language, your style and accuracy will improve.

2. Read the instructions for the task carefully to find out what is required. Read through your class notes and any preparation work done on the topic.

3. Planning. Plan the task carefully, fulfilling all the task requirements. Structure it so that you include an effective introduction and conclusion as required. Note down any ideas, vocabulary or structures that you want to use.

4. Collect target language expressions on how to introduce a topic, express contrasting arguments etc.

5. Write your essay, taking care to include any grammar structures specified (try to include an effective variety of vocabulary and structures). Keep to the word limit. Be aware of the register required by the task.

Summing up. Independent work is a gradual, individual, and never-ending process of self-discovery. This is a process in which students gradually learn what independence is. An independent student acts independently

and in cooperation with others, they actively participate in the social processes of his learning, they interpret new information in accordance with their background knowledge, they know exactly how to learn and how to critically comprehend the learning process. Success in language learning depends on the learners. Students may think that some people are just 'good at languages', but the biggest factor in students' success is how much effort they are willing to put in and how effectively they can learn to direct that effort. Students will find many ideas on how to improve their four language skills.

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