

PART 1

1.1 Responsibility and autonomy

This section is a brief overview of the ideas and problems connected to training learners for responsibility. For the reader wishing to learn about these issues in more depth or detail, we included an annotated list of further reading at the end of the section.

What makes a responsible learner?

How would you describe responsible learners? Do they always do their homework and follow the teacher's instructions? Are they good team workers? Or do they volunteer to clean the blackboard? Are they diligent and obedient? They may not always be like that.

We do not think of responsible learners as role models (or teacher's pets), but as learners who *accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave accordingly*. So, when doing their homework or answering a question in class, they are not aspiring to please the teacher, or to get a good mark. They are simply making an effort in order to learn something.

Responsible learners do not have to be especially keen on team work, but they *are willing to cooperate with the teacher and others in the learning group for everyone's benefit*. Cooperation does not mean that they always obediently follow instructions: they may ask about the purpose of the activity first, or they may even come up with suggestions on how to improve an activity.

Finally, responsible students may not always do their homework, but whenever they fail to do it, they are aware of missing an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the foreign language. This is because they *consciously monitor their own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit, including classroom activities and homework*.

This last point leads us to the question of defining autonomy. We had a heated discussion about this when writing this section, trying to agree on where responsibility ends, and where autonomy starts.

Responsibility and autonomy

What makes an autonomous learner?

In theory, we may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one's own actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement, and they are apparently very much interrelated.

In practice, the two concepts are more difficult to distinguish. Consider, for example, these three actions:

- interrupting the teacher's explanation to ask about a certain point in the explanation
- looking up a word at home that the teacher used in the lesson but did not 'teach'
- paying special attention when the lesson is about something that the learner is not so good at.

In all these actions, learners behave responsibly as they are consciously making an effort to contribute to their learning. They are also autonomous in the sense that they act independently of the teacher, not waiting to be told what to do.

We may conclude that, in order to foster learner autonomy, we clearly need to develop a sense of responsibility and also, encourage learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning.

Why should you develop responsibility and autonomy?

The saying goes: you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. In language teaching, teachers can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not suffice, just as the horse would remain thirsty if he stood still by the river waiting patiently for his thirst to go away. And, in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realise and accept that success in learning depends as much on the student as on the teacher. That is, they share responsibility for the outcome. In other words, success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude.

Some degree of autonomy is also essential to successful language learning. No matter how much students learn through lessons, there is always plenty more they will need to learn by practice, on their own. Also, the changing needs of learners will require them to go back to learning several times in their lives: then again, they will need to be able to study on their own. The best way to prepare them for this task is to help them become more autonomous.

1.1 Responsibility and autonomy

How far can you go?

We think of autonomy or responsibility as attitudes that students may possess to varying degrees. No student is completely without a sense of responsibility and we are not likely to meet in person the ideal student, either. Personality traits, preferred learning styles, and cultural attitudes set limits to the development of autonomy.

Individual students or the community they come from may have a strong aversion to individualism and a preference for collectivism, so they may be unwilling to take personal initiative. Some students may not be able to handle uncertainty and do everything they can to avoid it, so they may find it alarming to work without the constant supervision of the teacher, or they may detest all open-ended tasks, where there is no one correct answer. Some other students may look at the teacher as a figure of authority who is always there to tell them what to do.

How can you adapt to new teacher roles?

Developing responsible attitudes in the learner entails some deviation from traditional teacher roles as well. As students begin to take charge of their learning, the teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator or counsellor in an increasing number (and type) of classroom situations.

You may find it useful to think over your existing attitudes. One way to do this is to confront yourself with the extreme views of the traditional and the learner centred approaches. You may also consider classroom tasks, and the way you share responsibility for their accomplishment between yourself and your students. (We included a list of typical tasks in the Appendix on page 101.) Look at the table on page 6 and try to put yourself somewhere along the continuum between the two extremes.

We would encourage you to experiment with moving towards the right hand side of the continuum. Learner responsibility can really only develop if you allow more room for learner involvement.

However, the change in your roles can be or perhaps should be gradual, rather than abrupt and dramatic. The school where you teach, the community of teachers, the parents of the students and the students themselves will have expectations about what roles a teacher is supposed to perform. These expectations may be very different from the teacher roles that facilitate learner responsibility, and if this is the case, changing them will require much patience and caution.

You may find that people oppose changes for different reasons, and not necessarily because they are against your aims. They may be afraid of the uncertainties and risks involved in changes in general, or they may have had negative experiences with some other alternative teaching methods

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77534-2 - Learner Autonomy: A Guide to Developing Learner Responsibility

Agota Scharle and Anita Szabo

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Responsibility and autonomy*

Traditional attitudes	My attitude	Student centred attitudes
I have all the information.	_____	The syllabus, the exam, and the information are here for us to share.
It is my job to transmit knowledge to you.	_____	I am not the fount of all knowledge.
I am responsible for your learning.	_____	You are responsible for your learning.
It is my job to make sure that you work.	_____	I am here to facilitate your learning by providing resources and support.
As the adult, and the professional, I have the expertise to make the right judgements and decisions about your learning.	_____	I trust that you want to learn and will take responsibility for your own learning.

(Adapted from Brandes and Ginnis, 1992.)

and are therefore suspicious of any such initiative. Some people may fear the loss of their authority, and some might be jealous of your increased popularity among students. Parents or teachers may also oppose the increase of learner involvement because they fear that it leads to disorder, lack of respect for adults, or less efficient teaching.

In any case, head-on collision is likely to provoke strong reactions, and then it may become very difficult to sort out the real reasons behind the conflict and soothe the opponents. If you take a gradual approach, then there is ample time for everybody to get used to the change, and for you to learn about the feelings and opinions of any opponents and find ways to deal with these. Also, with a quiet start you may be able to produce some results and win supporters, before any resistance springs up.

To prevent or deal with strong negative reactions, we recommend that you:

- think about who may respond negatively to the changes you propose and why,
- try taking the viewpoint of any potential opponents and think about how you could lower their apprehension or aversion,
- accept the validity of other teaching methods, and be ready to compromise,
- share information about what you are doing or planning to do with your superiors, colleagues, parents, and (perhaps most importantly) your students,

1.1 Responsibility and autonomy

- involve your colleagues as much as possible by sharing your problems and discussing your experiments with them, and
- be receptive to suggestions and criticism.

Support from colleagues in your school or elsewhere who are involved in a similar training programme may also help you to survive critical periods.

How can you develop responsibility and autonomy?

The activities in this book are designed to achieve two things. They help learners to realise the importance of their contribution and they develop the abilities learners will need to take charge of their own learning. Let us consider each skill and attitude that we have identified as building blocks of responsibility and autonomy.

Motivation and self-confidence: We have earlier quoted the example of the horse taken to the river to drink, and explained that unless he is willing to do his part (lower his head to reach the river and take in some water), the horse will remain thirsty. Here we may add that the project will also fail if the horse is not thirsty at all. In other words, *motivation* is a prerequisite for learning and responsibility development alike. However, for our purposes not any kind of motivation will do.

We need to encourage *intrinsic* motivation, the source of which is some inner drive or interest of the learner. Intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify with the goals of learning and that makes them more willing to take responsibility for the outcome. In turn, a larger scope for student self-determination and autonomy generates intrinsic motivation. In other words, motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other.

It is important to note that rewards and punishment (*extrinsic* motivation) can also stimulate learning, but at the same time they increase the dependence of the learner.

Apart from reinforcing motivation, *self-confidence* contributes to the development of responsibility in its own right. The learners must believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and they can rely on themselves, not only on the teacher. The effect works the other way as well: a feeling of responsibility and independence brings a sense of well-being and confidence.

Monitoring and evaluation: When we encourage students to focus on the *process* of their learning (rather than the *outcome*) we help them consciously examine their own contribution to their learning. Such an awareness of the difference that their efforts can make is an essential first step to the development of a responsible attitude.

Responsibility and autonomy

Self-evaluation requires the learners to go even further: they have to step into the shoes of the teacher and judge their own work as objectively as they can. By doing so, they can formulate an idea of their level of proficiency: discover weak and strong points and plan the directions of progress. Setting targets for themselves, they are more likely to consider these targets their own and feel responsible for reaching them.

Learning strategies serve as tools to improve one's language competence, and learners can really only be held responsible for their competence if they are aware of these tools. So, we need to show students the variety of available strategies, help them to find out what works for them, and help them to discover how and when to use these strategies. We can bring students to the thrilling experience of exploring and expanding their own abilities.

Cooperation and group cohesion: Promoting cooperation in the classroom affects learner attitudes in several ways. It encourages the learners to rely on each other (and consequently themselves as well) and not only on the teacher. Group work also creates opportunities for feedback from peers: learners will do things to please the group rather than to please the teacher. Finally, pair and group work (as compared to whole class work) may help you to get a higher proportion of students actively involved in completing a task.

These then are the building blocks of responsible attitudes on the part of the learner. But the development process also requires a certain teacher attitude: a willingness to take learners as partners in achieving common goals, consistency in control, and a willingness to delegate tasks and decisions. Let us now consider these.

Sharing information with the learner: By sharing all the relevant information with students, teachers express respect and a willingness to regard learners as partners in working towards the common aim of learning a foreign language. This includes being very clear about both short and long term objectives. Telling students about the aim(s) of a particular activity helps them to identify with these aims and hence to feel more responsible for the outcome.

Consistent control: It is very important to clearly establish expectations towards the learner, the limits of acceptable behaviour and the consequences of failing to meet expectations. You may find that, as long as you apply rules consistently, learners are willing to play by these rules. But, make sure not to tighten your control too much, as that may stifle all learner initiative.

Delegating tasks and decisions: If learners are to take more responsibility for their learning, they need to have more influence on the learning process. This calls for a reallocation of some tasks and decisions in classroom work, so that students can get more involved for example in

1.1 Responsibility and autonomy

choosing learning materials or correcting mistakes. Students are of course not trained teachers and cannot take over *any* teacher role, but they are surely able to cope with some of the teacher's roles. It is important that the teacher should respect the ways they handle these tasks, and expect learners to deal with the consequences of their decisions. Support them but do not rescue them or, in other words, do not be afraid to let them make mistakes.

Stages in the process of developing learner responsibility

People do not normally wake up to a fine day and find that they have become responsible overnight. More likely, they go through a slow, gradual process as they are approaching adulthood. We divided this process into the following three phases:

- *Raising awareness* is the starting point. Here we present new viewpoints and new experiences to the learners and encourage them to bring the inner processes of their learning to the conscious level of their thinking. We are trying to bring them to discoveries: 'Wow, this is interesting!' or, 'So, that's the way it is!'

Most of the activities at this stage are rather tightly structured, and controlled by the teacher. This is because we assume that learners are not yet very responsible: they need to be told what to do.

- The next step is practising the skills introduced at the previous stage in order to begin *changing attitudes*. This is a slow process requiring a lot of practice and patience, since it takes time to go from understanding to practising new roles and habits, especially when this involves breaking away from stubborn old patterns of behaviour. Learners who have little sense of responsibility in general require particular attention and patience.

Many of the activities at this stage are repeatable, and they tend to allow more room for learner initiative.

- *Transferring roles* to the learner requires a considerable change in classroom management and so it may be the most demanding phase for the teacher.

The activities are loosely structured, giving a considerable amount of freedom to the students in accomplishing tasks, or even, in deciding about tasks.

We see this as a smooth process where one phase develops into the next. So, even though we want the learner to be aware of the process as a whole and the actual changes within each phase, the transition from one phase to the other is not some momentous event that may be announced as an achievement.

*Responsibility and autonomy****The use of integrated and explicit training***

Learner training may take the form of an optional course offered to interested students, or may be incorporated into a regular language course. A further choice is whether to develop skills and attitudes implicitly, that is, helping students to use strategies but not actually discussing these strategies with them, or explicitly, with the conscious participation of the learners.

We have chosen to integrate responsibility development into the regular curriculum for three very practical reasons. First, combining learner development with regular curricular aims may save a lot of time and money. Second, there are always some not particularly motivated students who would never volunteer to attend a learner training course. Meeting them in the regular, obligatory classes, we may 'get them on our side' even before they notice. Third, we can use the contents of the regular school curriculum as a meaningful context for strategy training.

Throughout the development process, and especially in the teaching of learning strategies, we recommend that students are taught skills and attitudes explicitly. This is because we believe that awareness and reflection are essential for the development of responsibility. Explicit training may also encourage a collaborative spirit between the teacher and the learner. Finally, in the case of learning strategies, the conscious realisation of what strategies are applied in a given activity may increase the chances of transfer to other tasks.

1.2 How to use the book

The activities

The activities are presented in three sections according to the stages of developing responsible learner attitudes: raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. At the beginning of each subsection, we briefly explain the general aims of the activities included, the underlying rationale, and some further suggestions on how to use them. Within the sections we have grouped activities according to what aspect of responsibility they tackle. The three sections follow the recommended chronological order of applying the activities, while activities within the sections can be used in any order, as it seems appropriate.

The outline of each activity begins with a list of basic characteristics:

- *level* shows the difficulty of the activity in terms of required language proficiency (indicated if the activity is only applicable to particular levels)
- *main goals* describe the attitude or skill the activity is designed to tackle
- *language focus* indicates other curricular objectives, such as grammar practice and subskills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing
- *preparation* lists materials or devices you may need for the activity, such as handouts or tapes
- *notes* may include some other useful information on the activity

In some cases the instructions on how to carry out the activity are followed by further suggestions on possible variations. For example, these may be adaptations to a different level of linguistic ability or to a different group size.

Some activities are supplied with photocopiable sample materials, which are usually placed next to the activity, and in a few cases in the Appendix. Finally, the Index helps you find activities for particular areas of grammar, skills practice, or specific topics.

Starting out

You may already have a fairly precise understanding of your learners' attitudes towards learning if you have had time to observe their work in

How to use the book

class. Do they ask questions? Do they respond quickly to instructions? Do they do their homework? Do they listen to you when you correct their mistakes?

Still, you may find it useful to begin by collecting some information on the existing attitudes and expectations of your learners. Especially with a class that seems unreceptive to a teaching style that would require considerable activity from the learners, you will need a lot of careful preparation. What sorts of experiences have they had with other teachers? What sorts of activities are they used to? In section 2.1.1 (pages 16–24) we have included some examples of how you may collect such information.

Finding out about your learners' expectations will help you to devise a gradual introduction of new elements into your teaching, and you may be better able to deal with your students' reactions.

You may experiment first with some activities and embark on a systematic implementation of the development programme once you have confidence in the book. It is probably best to try the new approach with new groups, where the allocation of tasks and decisions between you and the learners is yet to be established.

Planning ahead

Once you know how responsible your learners already are, you need to decide what skills and attitudes need most attention, and how much time you can allot to training your learners for responsibility. It may be useful to include some awareness exercises into your programme even with already fairly autonomous learners, as bringing the use of skills and attitudes to the conscious level can help further development. With such a group however, you may need to spend less time on the second, practice stage. There is no general rule as to which activities to pick from the third section. Your choice of what teacher roles to transfer to students will depend on your personality, your views on teaching, the learners' inclinations, and the institutional environment.

It is perhaps best if you start by doing one or two awareness exercises each week, over one or two months, depending on how many lessons per week you teach and on which areas students need more awareness raising. For example, working on learning strategies may take a bit longer than increasing self-confidence. When you move on to practice activities, you may try and do as many as you can fit into the regular syllabus. Students will probably need at least two months to feel comfortable with the new attitudes and skills they have started to develop. When you feel the time is ripe, you can start experimenting with transferring roles. Then, depending on how students respond, you may move back to have a little more practice, or continue with transferring more demanding roles.