Towards a classroom pedagogy for learner autonomy
A framework of independent learning skills

Hayo Reinders

Abstract
Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the importance of learner autonomy and the role of individual learners in directing their own learning process, both inside and outside the classroom (Alford & Pachler 2007, Benson 2000, Breen 2001, Conacher & Kelly-Holmes 2007). However, in practice it is not always clear how to support learners in this role, and how to ensure they are ready to assume it. In this article I explore some of the teaching aspects related to the development of learner autonomy and propose a framework of skills that could be used by teachers as guide to increasing learner responsibility in the language classroom.

Learner autonomy in language teaching
Language teachers have always attempted to find ways to reconcile the collective nature of most teaching environments with the, inevitably, individual aspects of learning. The development of learner autonomy, or learners’ ability to take control over their own learning (Holec 1981), has been one way in which teachers have tried to make links with learners at a more individualised level, and to connect classroom learning with out-of-class language use. The theoretical and pedagogical rationale for the implementation of more learner-centred approaches to teaching is well-developed and goes back many decades. Starting from the 1950s, and influenced by the work of George Kelly (cf. Kelly 1955) and others in psychology, there emerged an increased recognition of the importance of the learner as an active individual who brings previous experiences, beliefs, and preferences to the classroom. Rather than seeing the learner as a passive container to be filled with the teacher’s ideas, these humanist approaches considered the learner as someone who actively shapes his or her learning experiences with the purpose of self-development and fulfilment (Stevick 1980, Atkinson 1993). Similarly, constructivism gives a more central stage to the learner by focusing less on the knowledge to be transmitted, and more on the process of constructing, reorganising, and sharing that knowledge. In this process, the learner plays a key role. In order to be successful, learners need to be made aware of their own learning and how to manage it. These developments also influenced language education both through the development of specific teaching methods rooted in these ideas (such as the Silent Way and Suggestopedia (Gattegno 1963, Lozanov 1978)), as well as, and perhaps more importantly, through a general influence on language teaching towards a greater focus on the learner.

Another influential impetus was the work done in the 1970s and 80s on identifying the characteristics of the ‘good language learner’ (Naiman et al 1978). It was found that successful language learners share a number of characteristics, such as (to give just two examples of a very long list) that they are proactive in their learning and are self-motivated. On the face of it, this seems to provide language teachers with a clear set of objectives for the classroom. For example, if learners can be made more proactive, then they could be expected to learn better. In practice, however, the implications of these studies are not quite so clear-cut. One problem relates to operationalising constructs such as ‘proactivity’ and ‘self-motivation’. There is a great deal of debate around what such concepts mean. And even if there was a consensus around them, it still would not be clear how learners could be made, for example, to self-motivate; teacher intervention would, per force, be a form of direction and any resulting motivation could thus not be said to originate from the learner. Another, perhaps more important problem is related to the question whether the characteristics of good language learners cause success in language learning, or whether these characteristics are simply correlated to better learning outcomes. It may be possible to be a successful language learner, even without being proactive, for example. It just may happen to be that more successful learners are also, generally speaking, more proactive. In other words, research on the good language learner may not have a great deal of explanatory power.

1 Although some have argued that these developments were not new at all, and that in fact similar developments had already started in the 19th century (van Essen 2002).
Similar problems surround the concept of learner autonomy, which, although it had been known and used as a political construct for centuries, as an educational construct developed only in the 1980s, to refer to the ability of learners to take control over their learning (Holec 1981). This ability implies many of the characteristics found in the ‘good language learner’. Learners are unlikely to take control over, for example, decisions about what to learn or how, unless they have some degree of motivation to do so, and unless they are proactive in their learning. This also makes the implementation of a pedagogy for developing learner autonomy difficult, for the same reasons it is difficult to identify practical implications of studies into good language learners.

In addition to the learning aspect, however, autonomy also includes a more political element, relating to the idea of individual freedom of choice. As applied to education, learners are unable to ‘take control’ or make choices about their learning, unless they are free to do so. At a practical level, this means that economical and other disadvantages of certain groups in the wider population, state-led education policies, school curricula, and the prescribed use of textbooks, are all examples of ways in which the development of autonomy may be hindered. Sometimes individual teachers can overcome these constraints, but often they cannot. An additional problem in relation to the concept of autonomy is that is unclear exactly what it means. Although a great deal of theorising has taken place over the years (see Benson 2007, for an overview), it sometimes seems as if autonomy has become a catch-all term, comprising other concepts such as motivation (Ushioda 1996), awareness (van Lier 1996), and interaction (Kohonen 1992). This lack of specificity may reduce its usefulness and make it difficult to operationalise. Few studies exist that have attempted to quantify autonomy (see for some attempts, Lai 2001, Vanijdee 2007), and some have suggested this should not be attempted as autonomy is a fundamental educational goal that underlies many other skills and can therefore not be broken down into component parts to be measured. Perhaps as a result, few practical models or comprehensive frameworks exist that could systematically guide teachers in implementing autonomy in the classroom.

More recent developments in education, both as an extension of the work done in the area of autonomy, and separate from it, have seen a greater understanding of the role of the individual in the learning process.

[...] most researchers agree that a major shift is taking place [...] in education away from the teacher-centred classroom toward a learner-centred system where the learner is in control of the lesson content and the learning process. (Fotos & Browne 2004, p.7)

One impetus for this has been the influential work done in the area of ‘individual differences’. This body of work emphasises, amongst others, how learners differ in their capacity to process, store, and retrieve information, how they differ in terms of age, intelligence, beliefs about language learning, and also how they differ in their approaches to learning. A related area is that of ‘learning styles’, which, based on work done in cognitive psychology and general education, attempts to identify ways in which learners differ in their learning preferences. This information may be used by teachers to match teaching styles with individuals’ learning styles, and to ensure that a range of learning styles is provided for.

The realisation that learners approach learning tasks in different ways has also led to an interest in what learners themselves have to say about their learning. The area of ‘learners’ voices’ (Benson and Nunan 2005), is an example of this interest, and attempts to better understand learners’ motivations, reasons for success, fossilisation or dropping out, and learners choices in how they approach the language learning process. The interest in learners’ voices is an example of a sociocultural perspective on learning. In this view, learners and learning can only be understood with reference to their context, their what, where, and how (Lantoff and Pavlenko, 2001). Sociocultural views of second language acquisition have had considerable influence on language teaching methodologies in recent years.

What all these developments and approaches have in common is that they assume that learners have or will develop the ability to manage decisions around lesson content and the learning process (Fotos & Browne 1997), and are able to act on their individual beliefs, experiences, learning styles and preferences. In practice, however, this is no necessarily the case. Students need a great deal of preparation and support before they are comfortable with, and are able to, assume greater responsibility for their learning. Reinders & Cotterall (2000), for example, found from a factor analysis
that the most important determinant of success in a self-access centre was the degree of preparation the students had received. The provision of materials for self-study also is not sufficient. Previous studies have shown (e.g. Jones 1993, Reinders & Lewis 2006) that such materials frequently lack the necessary support structures such as clear instructions or even answer keys, and do not explicitly encourage students to reflect on the learning process. Hurd (1998) also emphasises the importance of preparation:

…if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice, although it might appear to do so. (p. 72-73)

Even where materials have been carefully selected and are provided as part of a more comprehensive and structured approach to developing autonomy, the results may be disappointing. Reinders (2007), for example, found that students who were given access to an online self-access system, which included a variety of tools (such as needs analyses, and learning plans) and support structures (such as guided instructions and automated prompts and reminders), made use of the system in limited ways, often only using a small selection of the materials, without adequate planning, monitoring and revision.

Clearly, there is an important task for the classroom teacher in raising students’ awareness of their learning outside the classroom, and for ensuring students have the necessary skills. This is the focus of the rest of this article.

Towards a pedagogy for autonomy
Despite the general move towards greater learner-centredness in education, and the interest in learner autonomy in particular, it is not always clear how individual teachers can implement the underlying principles. Especially in relation to learner autonomy, as we have seen above, there is terminological confusion and existing materials and tools may not be sufficient in ensuring students develop the necessary awareness and skills. In response, several approaches have been taken to fostering autonomy. I divide these into specialist approaches, and general approaches.

Specialist approaches to fostering autonomy
Specialist approaches include all the deliberate programmes and support structures that do not form part of (although they may be linked to) regular classroom teaching, and that have the development of autonomy as one of their primary aims. The table below summarises the most common of these approaches, many probably well-known to most readers, and includes references to some of they key texts for more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPROACH</th>
<th>INVOLVES</th>
<th>REFERENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner training</td>
<td>Specific courses or short courses where the focus is on developing skills for independent learning and raising students’ awareness of the importance of learning outside the classroom. Such courses usually include strategy instruction and often also include general study skills, rather than language learning skills only.</td>
<td>Rubin &amp; Thompson 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy instruction</td>
<td>Often offered as part of regular classroom teaching, and sometimes offered as specific classes or short courses on language learning strategies.</td>
<td>Macaro 2001, Oxford 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-access</td>
<td>Often considered the most common way of implementing autonomy, the provision of a self-access centre, or online self-access materials, usually involves making available resources for independent learning and staff support. Sometimes self-access learning is integrated into the classroom with the teacher</td>
<td>Gardner &amp; Miller 1999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
working with students in the centre, and sometimes self-access is used outside classroom time, for remedial or practice purposes, either with a teacher or independently. In North America Writing Centres often perform a similar role.

| Language advising or Language counselling | A type of language support whereby a teacher and a learner meet to discuss the learner's needs and progress, and where the advisor offers feedback, recommends materials, and helps the learner to plan their learning. | Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans 2001 |
| Specific tools | Many institutions have developed or link to (online or print) tools, for the management of the language learning process, which often explicitly aim to foster learner autonomy. Examples include (electronic) portfolios such as those developed by the European Union, tandem learning programmes, and personal learning environments, that aim to facilitate and create links between formal and informal learning. Some have developed online learning environments that offer materials for self-study, tips for independent learning, and opportunities for staff and student communication. | Portfolios: Ekbatani & Pierson 2000. Online learning environments: White 2003. Tandem learning: Schwienhorst 2007. |

**General approaches**

This article is mainly concerned with the practical operationalisation of learner autonomy and its implementation in the language classroom. For that reason the discussion below is restricted to general language teaching situations and looks at ways in which teachers can encourage autonomy in the classroom. One obvious way to do this is to make links with specialist approaches that may have been taken inside the school. For example, where a self-access centre is available, teachers can take students to the centre at certain times to encourage (guided) self-study. However, here the specialist approaches are left aside (the above references will give practical guidance), and the focus is instead on the pedagogical aspects of autonomy that teachers can implement as part of their teaching. It is important to point out here that the more political and philosophical aspects of autonomy are not actively considered in this framework (although they are to an extent through the recurrent focus on reflection; see below), not because they are not considered important (they are crucial), but because a climate of relative freedom for both teachers and learners is assumed for the framework below to be implemented. This is, of course, not the case in all classrooms and institutions, but a discussion of this aspect of implementing autonomy takes us too far from the main aims of this article. For this, the reader is referred to Benson (2000).

As discussed above, it is difficult to operationalise learner autonomy. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Reinders 2000), it is not as difficult to operationalise autonomous learning; it is not impossible, for example, to recognise learning that is learner-initiated, or to identify when a learner self-monitors. For this reason, the framework below starts from the learner and his or her actions. These actions can be encouraged, modelled, and monitored by the teacher. They are an adaptation and extension of Malcolm Knowles’ extensive and influential work on self-directed learning, carried out in the 1970s (cf. Knowles 1975). Although Knowles wrote about general education rather than language learning, many of the principles he identified apply equally to language education and form the basis of the framework below. A similar approach has been taken by Winne & Hadwin (1998) who identified four key phases in academic learning situations. Academic study generally requires a relatively extensive amount of independent learning and learner self-management, and is therefore a reasonable starting point for a discussion on skills for developing learner autonomy. Winne & Hadwin’s four phases include 1) task definition, 2) goal setting and planning, 3) enacting study tactics and strategies, and 4) metacognitively adapting studying. The framework below draws on these, and expands on them.
Below, the stages are shown in summary form. The middle column shows how, in general, each stage is covered in a completely teacher-directed environment (such as some classrooms) and the right-hand column in a completely learner-directed situation. Many teaching and learning situations would probably fall somewhere between these two extremes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING STAGES</th>
<th>TEACHER-DIRECTED</th>
<th>LEARNER-DIRECTED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying needs</td>
<td>Placement tests, teacher feedback.</td>
<td>Learner experiences/ difficulties in using the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting goals</td>
<td>Determined by the course, relatively fixed.</td>
<td>Contextually determined, relatively flexible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting resources</td>
<td>Provided by teacher.</td>
<td>Self-selection by learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting learning</td>
<td>Teacher models and instructions.</td>
<td>Self-selection by learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Exercises and activities provided by teacher</td>
<td>Implementation (language use) and experimentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring progress</td>
<td>Regular classroom feedback and comments on assignments and tasks</td>
<td>Self-monitoring, peer-feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and revision</td>
<td>Tests, curriculum changes</td>
<td>Self-assessment, reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will now discuss each of these in turn, with specific attention to how they can be implemented in the classroom.

**Identifying needs**

It is surprising how often learners have no clear idea of their language needs, and the discrepancies that exist between what learners think they need and where their actual weaknesses lie. Equally worryingly, many learners have little idea of their learning needs (Barcelos 2008). In other words: they have little knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners. They may know for example that they need to improve their writing skills but may not know that they are poor at learning with and from others, which is a learning skill, and one that will affect their success in writing.

In many classrooms, learners are simply given a score that indicates their general level, but not always individualised profiles of strengths and weaknesses including their learning needs. More importantly, learners’ individual needs often do not directly inform classroom practice and learners may be forgiven for wondering what the relation is between their learning and the teacher’s teaching (Lewis).

An alternative is to make an extensive needs analysis process a focal point of the class in the first weeks of the course and to encourage students to share their findings with others. Subsequent classroom activities should be explicitly linked to the identified needs and students asked to reflect on their success in completing classroom activities, in relation to their needs.

The language and learning needs should be recorded (perhaps in a learning diary or portfolio) and reviewed regularly. As a needs analysis is the starting point of a dynamic process, it should be repeated at regular intervals. In this way, students become aware of the importance of aligning their work with their needs on an ongoing basis.

**Setting goals**

Just as the needs analysis helps students take the first step in understanding their strengths and weaknesses, goal setting helps them to be specific about the outcomes they are aiming for. As Nunan says: ‘learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have, by definiton, become autonomous.’ (1999, p.145).

However, most traditional courses are very prescriptive in what learners are expected to learn. It may not be possible or desirable for teachers to ignore existing curricula and required learning outcomes
(such as, for example, in the case of national exams), but learners should be encouraged to view the course as one element towards achieving their own goals, and to seek out additional support or opportunities for practice, if needed. In addition, having clear goals allows learners to focus on those aspects of the class that are most relevant to them.

In the longer term it may be feasible for teachers to encourage the school to move towards a degree of learner-choice in the courses. Quoting Nunan again:

 [...] the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught. (1988, p. 2)

The only way to move towards learner-centredness then is for students to have some say over what they are taught.

**Planning learning**

Setting goals and planning learning are different sides of the same coin. Whereas one’s goals help to specify one’s destination, planning is like finding the best road to get there. Planning involves drawing up practical plans and allocating time to them. This step is often not made explicit by teachers who tend to direct classroom practice in the following respects:

1) content and activities
2) the order of the content and the activities
3) the ways in which learners are expected to participate and interact

In other words, most classrooms prescribe the what, when and how of the learner’s actions. Learner-centred approaches will aim to (gradually) encourage learners to make these decisions for themselves. This could mean giving learners a choice over, for example, whether to use a model argument essay to do cohesion-building exercises, or to write a rebuttal essay. This may mean offering different types of activities for the same set of materials or language content. It may also mean that certain activities do not have to be completed in a fixed order.

**Selecting resources**

Normally this is the task of the teacher, but many teachers have experimented with involving learners in the selection and preparation of resources for learning (Aston 1993, Benson 1994). For example, Dam (1995) asked students to locate authentic materials from outside the school to be used in the classroom and the self-access centre. Many of the activities that could be classified as tasks (cf. Ellis 2000) could involve the production or sharing of materials by learners.

**Selecting learning strategies**

Many learners are content to leave the teacher to decide how activities are to be completed, but will still need to develop the ability to use a wide range of strategies and to choose strategies appropriate to the task, if they are to take full responsibility for their learning.

Generally speaking strategies are divided into cognitive strategies (e.g. ways of memorising vocabulary), metacognitive strategies (e.g. being able to self-assess), and social-affective strategies (e.g. being able to find opportunities to speak the language, or to motivate oneself) and it is important that teachers consider how they will cover each of these in class through examples, modelling, and practice (for a practical overview of strategies in language teaching, see Cotterall and Reinders 2004).

A good starting point is to ask students to identify their current strategy use. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990), is a good tool for this (an adapted version is available online http://homework.wtuc.edu.tw/sill.php). By completing the questionnaire again later in the year, learners can see if they have expanded their repertoire. An important related point is to recognise the improvements learners make in their choice and use of learning strategies by giving regular feedback and by awarding credit on the basis of progress in this area.

**Practice**

In classroom situations teachers provide opportunities for practice and give frequent feedback. Alternatively, many teachers give homework consisting of exercises for drilling. Many of these
materials do not offer students any choice in which aspect of the new knowledge they have learned they will practise. Nor does it give them any choice in how they will use or implement their new knowledge. An important aspect of autonomy is the ability to experiment with the language, and to take risks (cf. Schwienhorst 2007). It is important then for practice materials and activities to encourage students to find ways to move beyond the confines of the pedagogic environment (the classroom, the self-access centre, the school) and to incorporate new knowledge into their lives. The challenge here is to find a balance between giving students freedom, while still giving them support. This support can be in the form of carefully structured tasks that require students to practise the language on their own terms, but then to input their experiences back into the task itself (for example through a webquest, or by accessing a corpus, where students need to find examples of particular language use). In this way, the materials can ensure that language is recycled and that regular presentation and revision takes place, while still leaving a degree of choice with the student.

**Monitoring progress**

In a teacher-directed environment, such as in a course with a set curriculum, progress is generally measured by others; the teacher will give feedback and perhaps there are regular mini-tests and assignments. For the development of autonomy learners will need to develop the ability to monitor their own progress and revise their learning plans accordingly. This includes reflection on their motivation levels and other social-affective aspects of the learning. Learning diaries (for example in the form of a learning blog) are a good tool to encourage this process. These could be private or shared with other learners and if they are online, the teacher could give feedback too. Learners need to be encouraged, however, to develop the necessary vocabulary. Generally, many learners’ reflection is limited to surface-level language and learning issues (cf. Reinders 2007). Learners might, for example, write about having a problem with understanding a native speaker, without going into detail and without exploring the reasons behind their difficulty. It may be that the learner did not hear the speaker properly, because she has not learned to distinguish between p and b, or it could be because she did not notice or recognise the use of a connector (e.g. ‘however’). Similarly, most reflection tends to focus on problems. It is important to encourage students to record their successes too, and to identify the reasons for them. Providing students with a model diary or practising reflection in class may be helpful.

**Assessment and revision**

Whereas monitoring one’s progress is an ongoing task that takes place as part of every learning episode, assessment is usually less frequent. Many students, understandably, want to have a sense of achievement and test scores can provide a kind of external validation that is important to them. Denying this entirely may not be feasible or desirable. However, at the same time learners need to be given opportunities for alternative assessment, so as to enable them to feel confident in their own learning when they no longer have the support of the institution. Many teachers use portfolios for this purpose. The Council of Europe has developed the European Language Portfolio, which is available as a free download from its website (www.coe.int/portfolio). Online tools such as Ning (www.ning.com) and Eduspaces (www.eduspaces.com) are more recent ‘web 2.0’ applications can be used for the same purpose. Other options include self-assessment worksheets and activities that encourage students to put into practice what they have learned (e.g. to have a conversation with a native speaker or to read an academic article without a dictionary). It is important that the assessment is linked to the learners’ previous work. In some cases materials (and teachers) make the mistake of individualising the learning and then use a blanket test to assess that learning. Some teachers experiment with alternative forms of assessment, for example those where the students’ own assessment contributes to their final grade (cf. Pierson & Ekbatani 2000).

**Underpinning autonomous learning: reflection and motivation**

A crucial aspect of the autonomous learning process is the reflection that underpins all of the stages discussed above. Especially the final reflection that takes place after monitoring one’s progress and assessing one’s learning, is a key phase, as it links one’s accomplishments with future work through a revision of one’s goals and plans. Therefore, learners should be encouraged to think about what went well in their learning, what did not go well, why this was so, what alternatives there are, and how this affects one’s objectives. In this way, reflection is the ‘glue’ that holds autonomous learning together. The final reflection changes the learning process from a one-shot sequence, to a cycle of learning where previous experiences are the building blocks for future learning. As Little says: ‘The pursuit of autonomy in formal learning environments must entail explicit conscious processes; otherwise we leave its development to chance’ (2001, p. 34).
Of course learning is not only a cognitive but also an eminently social process. Interaction and collaboration are now seen as crucial to the development of autonomy (van Lier 1996, Schwienhorst 2008). Above I have given suggestions for points in the learning process where students could benefit from interaction and collaborating in their (self-directed) learning. This applies equally to activities involving reflection. Although often we think of reflection as an individual activity, there are many ways in which learners can communicate with others about their learning and help each other become more aware of their roles in the language learning process.

Related to this, the affective aspect of learning is also crucial to success, especially in independent learning where the traditional classroom environment with its regular feedback and contact with other learners is replaced with, for many learners, a less familiar context where learners are themselves responsible for maintaining their interest and motivation. Independent learning is likely to challenge learners' beliefs about what language learning entails, and may lead to frustration. Therefore (self-) motivation, as a blanket term covering the affective aspect of learning, is a key pillar of the model presented below. Teachers know that learners need affective support, but do not generally model techniques for self-motivation and collaborative techniques for learners to draw on each other for support outside the classroom. Tandem learning activities in its various guises (cf. Kötter 2002).

This cyclical nature of the autonomous learning process is shown in the figure below, with reflection, motivation, and interaction, providing the cognitive, affective and social backbone.
Implementing the framework

Developing autonomy is a lengthy process and the successful implementation of the framework described above therefore depends, to a large extent, on the persistence of the teacher. It is not realistic to expect students to take responsibility for their learning from one day, or even month, to the next. Autonomy develops gradually and is a mindset that calls for certain skills, not the other way around. The overall classroom atmosphere needs to value and encourage reflection and the student’s own views and roles in the learning process.

In many cases teachers report that students are unwilling to take on a more active role (Brown, Smith & Usioda 2007, Hiemstra & Brockett 1994, Huang 2006, Tsang 1999), and they may be disappointed that their efforts were unsuccessful. However, it may well be that the experience of being asked to guide their learning, is entirely new to students. Some of my students were stunned when I asked them how they thought we could best tackle a particular learning task. They had never considered the question. As a result, some learners may criticise the teacher for not doing her job. It is therefore crucial to start with a clear rationale for any changes in the language classroom. Talk to students about what you aim to do and why. Perhaps invite an older student to talk about the importance of independent learning after the course (I have successfully enlisted the help of PhD students to talk to undergraduates about the skills they needed in their studies). Cotterall (1995) has developed a survey that aims to measure students’ readiness for autonomy. This could be a starting point for determining how much preparation students are going to need.
In addition to giving students a rationale, start slowly by occasionally allocating some reflection time, or by modelling one of the skills in the framework. Once students are comfortable with these breaks from (what they perceive to be) regular classroom teaching, you can gradually move towards implementing the entire framework, perhaps initially in the form of a project.

In addition, students will need support while acquiring these skills. Ask students to work together in teams or pairs and give regular feedback on their learning plans, or the resources they have selected. Students need to know that you are there to guide them when needed, and will need to be motivated what may be a new and at times frustrating process (Dickinson 1995, p. 168). Related to this, it is important to connect the work students do by themselves with what happens in the rest of the class. You can make this connection by asking students to talk about their experiences, either in public or by sharing their learning diary with you. Encourage students to talk about what worked for them and what did not, and help them to identify reasons for this. Share success stories with the other students. In other words, implementing autonomy should never be a case of sink or swim, but a gradual testing of the waters with a lifeguard on hand, before actually diving in.

The tips and suggestions above do not cover the whole story. As mentioned at the start, they do not explicitly address the political aspect of autonomy. Some teachers may find it difficult to implement the framework because their institutions do not allow much freedom in the curriculum. Nevertheless, it may be possible to select one or more parts of the framework as a starting point. Also, learner autonomy is not only about the development of a set of skills, but is rather about developing a certain mindset that sees learning as an active process of discovery. Although implementing the framework suggested above will not guarantee students develop autonomy, the activities do involve a shift of focus from you onto the learners. Knowing that they are valued as individuals and are supported in their learning, will mean that students are more likely to develop this mindset.

References


Vanijdee, A. (2003). Thai Distance English Learners and Learner Autonomy. Open Learning, 18(1), 75-84.

Useful resources
Auto-L, an online discussion forum for people interested in learner autonomy and self-access.
To subscribe to AUTO-L, send a message to:
Wldyc@cunyvm.cuny.edu

Subject line: AUTO-L Request

Message:
Subscribe AUTO-L
Your name
Your institutional affiliation
Your e-mail address

Autonomy bibliography. Approximately 1,700 references in the areas of autonomy, self-access, and advising.
http://www.hayo.nl/autonomybibliography.php

Online postgraduate certificate in language advising:
http://www.hull.ac.uk/languages/postgraduate/online_PG/index.html

Online examples and videorecordings with worksheets of language advising sessions.
http://ec.hku.hk/1to1/