

Learner Independence: Is age a factor?

CARLOS BARBISAN, HEINEMANN INTERNATIONAL²

MARÍA SARA RODRÍGUEZ, HEINEMANN INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

The concept of Learner Independence is now generally accepted in the EFL profession. The amount of research and experimentation so far carried out in this field has undoubtedly contributed to a deeper understanding of the processes involved in learning a foreign language and the insights we have gained will certainly result in more informed and, hopefully, more effective classroom practice.

There are, however, a number of aspects related to the concept of Learner Independence that, as teachers, we feel still need further discussion. We are mainly referring to the practical implications of trying to apply the concept of Learner Independence in our classrooms. Questions such as "How exactly can we promote Learner Independence?", "Is it justified to implement activities that, although they may promote Learner Independence, can only be carried out in L1 at lower levels?", "How should we interpret the often contradictory feedback we receive from learners?", "Is the concept valid regardless of the age of the learners?". It is precisely this last question, the question of age in relation to Learner Independence, that we would like to discuss in this paper.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we outline the concept of Learner Independence as we understand it. In the second section we address the question of age in relation to Learner Independence. Finally, in the last section, we propose a number of classroom activities that, in our view, may promote Learner Independence with very young learners, aged 7+.

The Concept of Learner Independence

In our view, there are two basic notions embedded in the concept of Learner Independence: confidence and capability. An independent learner is somebody who is first of all confident that he/she has the ability to learn, in our case, a foreign language. Secondly, an independent learner is somebody who has

²The authors can be reached through Heinemann International, Serapio Rendón 125, 2o piso, Colonia San Rafael, 06470 Mexico, D.F., Tel./Fax (915) 705-4845.

been made aware of their full potential for learning and who has been encouraged to make use of that potential inside and outside the classroom, both during the period of formal instruction and, hopefully, once that period is over.

The main concern is therefore with the issue of how to promote certain processes, e.g., processes that will result in learners gradually feeling more confident about their learning ability, rather than with the final outcome. In other words, we shall be more concerned with finding ways in which we can encourage learners to move towards independence rather than with providing a description of how an independent learner behaves.

Age and Learner Independence

The practical application of the concept of Learner Independence in our everyday classroom practice involves making a series of decisions in areas such as classroom management, selection of materials and techniques, etc., some of which may at first sight look somewhat unorthodox. To give but one example, in order to encourage learners to discover different learning strategies we may decide on an activity which can take up half a lesson and which may need to be done in the L1.

Having to make this type of decision not only forces us to constantly reassess our view of the learning process and its implications for teaching but can also often make us very worried as to whether we're really doing the right thing.

Of the many issues that we tend to worry about perhaps the one that we have heard the most about from colleagues is the question of age, which can give rise to rather contradictory views, for example:

"Learner Independence is OK but it will only work with adult learners because of the type of reasoning it requires."

"I agree with the concept of Learner Independence but I don't think it can work with adult students. They would reject the kind of activities involved because of their previous learning experience. They are no longer flexible the way children are."

"It does not work with children. They are not mature enough."

The view that we would like to put forward in this paper as regards this issue is that, if we agree that Learner Independence is the result of a long-term process--a process about which we still do not know very much--and if we also agree that trying to promote Learner Independence may have a beneficial effect on the learning process, then the earlier we start the more likely we shall be to achieve positive results. In other words, we believe that we should start

trying to promote Learner Independence from the very beginning of the learning process, regardless of the age of the learners.

This view implies looking at the student as an individual that is embarking upon a process where different aspects of his personality will be at play and not just as a student of English who is there to learn the intricacies of a new language. The learning process is then not solely the responsibility of the teacher, i.e., it does depend only on whether one is a "good" or a "bad" teacher, but is the result of the interaction of a variety of factors which include students' personalities, interests, etc. In order to build these considerations into our teaching we need to devise activities which take into account learners' interests and opinions, so that they can feel that they are contributing to their own learning and not just responding to the stimuli or directions provided by the teacher.

In the final part of this paper we have included some activities we devised to that effect and which can be implemented with very young students regardless of the coursebook being used.

Sample Activities

These are some suggestions for activities that we believe would help promote learner independence with students aged 7+.

Activity 1

Aim: To give students the opportunity to give their opinion about the materials that they use in class.

Procedure: Refer students to three texts you have already dealt with in class. Give each student a set of cards like the one below and a piece of blue tack.



Ask them to stick the cards on top of the texts according to how they feel about them.

Students compare what they did and suggest ways in which the texts could be made more interesting.

Activity 2

Aim: To encourage students to identify differences/similarities between their tongue and the L2.

Procedure: Students are given the transcript of a spoken text, e.g., from the text-book they are using. Ss underline any new words they find in the text and decide how they would pronounce these words if they were speaking their mother tongue. Ss then listen to the text and tell you what differences they have noticed.

Activity 3

Aim: To give students the opportunity to give their opinion about the activities done in class.

Procedure: At the beginning of the lesson give Ss a worksheet as follows:

CODE
VG = Very Good I = Interesting B = Boring
Activity 1: _____
Activity 2: _____
Activity 3: _____

Explain that during this lesson, after each activity they do in the classroom, they will have a little time to think about it and they will have to write the letter that expresses their view about the activity in the spaces provided.

At the end of the lesson find out what the majority of the class seems to think and why.