

SOME CHALLENGES IN ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Munojatkhon Umaralieva

Senior teacher of Ferghana State University

ABSTRACT

This article provides important skills for English learners who are learning independently. The specific features of independent learning are also analyzed

Keywords: independent learning, skill, ability, mastery

INTRODUCTION

Today's evolving education system requires students to be independent learners, however there is no ideal course book which contains everything that teachers and students can use in the classroom. Many students have trouble making the transition to the more independent learning required at university compared with their previous study. University study requires students to take responsibility for their own learning, to be more self-directed, to make decisions about what they will focus on and how much time they will spend on learning both inside and outside the classroom. This transition may be especially difficult for students who may be used to more support and direction and even 'parent-like' relationships with their teachers at university. It will be useful for them (and all students) to know precisely how they are responsible for their learning in their new setting. This will require them to understand that they need to play a more active role in their own learning and will require greater self-motivation and organisation and greater self-awareness (metacognition) of their learning needs and behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

First of all it is important to identify commonly used terms such as "independent learning" and "critical thinking". They can mean different things to different people, in different disciplines and in different cultures. Therefore, it is important that this pivotal concept is explained to students so that they know what is required of them within their new context and discipline.

Philip Candy, in the now classic text "Self-direction for lifelong learning" (1991), quotes Forster (1972) to define independent learning/ study:

1. “Independent study is a process, a method and a philosophy of education: in which a student acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation;
2. it includes freedom of choice in determining those objectives, within the limits of a given project or program and with the aid of a faculty adviser;
3. it requires freedom of process to carry out the objectives;
4. it places increased educational responsibility on the student for the achieving of objectives and for the value of the goals”.

This definition clearly places the responsibility for learning in higher education on students, aided by teaching staff and defined by the limits and objectives of the programme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many students who are not used to learn independently till university may be surprised at how much work they are required to do ‘on their own’ outside of class and, in the absence of specific direction, may not be aware of their own responsibilities. They sometimes complain about the lack of direction generally in their courses. They may even interpret this as a lack of ‘value for money’ or a lack of interest and support from teachers or their department. It can be useful to spell out in course documents how many hours of work outside of the classroom are expected for each module or unit, and what precisely students are expected to do during this time. Contact hours and the level of autonomy required (or possible) vary considerably across discipline areas.

There are also challenges in encouraging more ‘independent learning’. For instance, a fellow teacher working in China illustrates some of the misunderstandings (in this case, linguistic) around the concept of independent learning: “Independent learning” was translated differently on a poster in a school I visited in China. They had borrowed our list of “good learning behaviors” but had translated independent learning as “learning on your own and not distracting or talking to others around you”.

This point reinforces the need to be explicit about what precisely students are expected to do and achieve. Most adult learning theory (e.g. Freire, 1972; Knowles, 1990; Mezirow, 1991) and the concept of independent learning itself should be acknowledged as being predominantly ‘Western’. Trahar (2007) gives a personal and academic account of the implications of this in teaching foreign languages including the potential for a lack of sensitivity to diversity, cultural inviolability and false

universalism. Recognising this and using Forster's (1972) definition of independent learning, it can be seen quite broadly to encompass a variety of situations and contexts where students are interpreting and scaffolding new knowledge and skills independently from those around them. However, this may include situations of group learning where activity may be collaborative and individual learning outcomes similar (or different) but each reached independently. Considered in this light, independent learning does not need to be seen only in terms of learning in 'isolation' but also within a community of learners.

Actually, the term independent learning is mostly used in higher education. Lecturers all the time emphasize self-learning and self-directed learning. But how can students learn when there is no direction at all or less instruction about assignments.

For this reason researchers suggest some solutions for the teachers in order to avoid such kind of problems.

Setting the foundations for independent learning:

- Talk to your students about their previous learning and teaching experiences.
- Find out their expectations of the course – how are they expecting to be taught, assessed and how do they expect to facilitate their own learning.
- Talk about your expectations (as a teacher, organiser and facilitator) and the requirements of the course.
- Reach a shared understanding of these expectations.
- Talk about independent learning in the context of communities of learners and provide opportunities for developing study communities (through group work, tutor-organised study buddies, online discussion boards).
- The transition for students into new ways of learning can be supported by providing early formative assessment and plenty of opportunities for students to explore their learning with peers and teachers.

Giving an overview of the subject matter so that learners have a framework within which to build their knowledge is another motivation. Consideration given to internationalising the curriculum will pay dividends as an accessible curriculum will be more easily engaged with by students looking to become autonomous learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommending multi-media resources for independent study including texts, audio, internet and video can be effective for your students learning. Andrew Cree from Teesside University describes how to build screen-capture movies of teaching

slides to allow students multi-media access to his teaching outside class; the additional audio track seemed to benefit students and resulted in reduced failure rates.

Skillful teachers find ways to motivate students using culturally inclusive pedagogy. 'Motivating International Students' by Dolan & Macias (2009) has several suggestions for motivating students in the classroom e.g. being welcoming, responsive and explicit.

- Whilst not necessarily directly affecting students' skills in independent learning, the connections made between teachers and students in the classroom can motivate students to learn outside the classroom.

- Encourage and build confidence especially in the early stages by providing opportunities for students to bring questions and observations to class which have arisen from their independent reading.

- Remind students of the various support systems available to them especially a few weeks after induction when this useful information may have been forgotten.

Tools for independent learning and self-organisation include:

- E-portfolios (collections of multimedia including text, images, audio, blogs) can be assembled by international students to demonstrate their learning over time (see Hill, 2009).

- Study skills sessions (goal setting, time management, working to deadlines, self-appraisal, reading).

- Ongoing training in using online information. Crucial to independent learning are the skills and knowledge of effectively using online information. However, some international students find identifying databases and extracting resources difficult (Hughes, 2005). Ongoing support should be available both in the classroom and the library to help students use strategic approaches to finding the information they need, and in the right quantities by defining the scope of their searches.

In conclusion, independent learning involves students acquiring an understanding of their learning, being motivated to learn and collaborating with teachers to structure their learning environment. Researchers found a consensus in the literature that independent learning does not merely involve students working alone; teachers have a key part to play in enabling and supporting independent learning though, for example, structuring group work. Self-motivation is also identified as necessary for successful independent learning.

REFERENCES

1. Candy, P. Self-direction for lifelong learning: a comprehensive guide to theory and practice. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. 1991.
2. Freire, P. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.1972.
3. Knowles, M. The adult learner: a neglected species (4th ed.) London: Gulf Publishing. 1990.
4. Mezirow, J. Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. 1991.
5. Trahar, S. Teaching and Learning: the International Higher Education Landscape – Some Theories and Working Practices. ESCalate Discussion Paper. 2007.
6. Hill, R. Case study: Capturing and Enhancing the Experiences of International Students using ePortfolios. Engineering Subject Centre. 2009.
7. Hughes, H. (2005) [Actions and Reactions: Exploring International Students' Use of Online Information Resources](#). Australian Academic and Research Libraries, 36 (4), 169-179.