

Learning to Learn English

A course in learner training

Teacher's Book

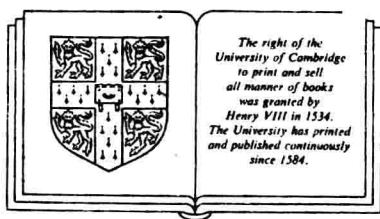
*Gail Ellis and
Barbara Sinclair*

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Introduction

Learning to Learn English is a course of learner training for learners of English as a foreign or second language from lower-intermediate level upwards. It has the following aims:

1. To help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best so that they may:
 - become more effective language learners
 - take on more responsibility for their own learning.
2. To provide language teachers with:
 - a framework for planning a course of learner training
 - a set of learner training materials and guidelines for their use in the classroom.
3. To help teachers use such a course of learner training together with their own language teaching syllabus and materials.

Learning to Learn English is based on recent research findings about second language acquisition and learning strategies and on practical experience of learner training in the classroom. The materials consist of:

Learner's Book: this contains a series of discussion points, activities and suggestions for more effective learning, as well as points of view about language learning and learning strategies from learners around the world. It is for use mainly in the classroom under the guidance of a teacher.

Teacher's Book: this contains an introduction to the theory of learner training, as well as detailed notes on how to implement the activities in the Learner's Book and integrate these into a language course. It also contains guidelines for adapting the activities to different teaching situations.

Cassette: this has recordings of native and non-native speakers of English which relate to the activities in the book.

1 The theory of learner training

If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day.
If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.

Confucius (551–479BC)

The aims of learner training

Learner training aims to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best so that they may:

- become more effective learners
- take on more responsibility for their own learning.

It focusses their attention on the process of learning so that the emphasis is on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn.

Learner training is based on the following assumptions:

- that individuals learn in different ways and may use a variety of learning strategies at different times depending on a range of variables, such as the nature of the learning task, mood, motivation levels;
- that the more informed learners are about language and language learning the more effective they will be at managing their own learning.

Helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- learning can be more effective when learners take control of their own learning because they learn what they are ready to learn;
- those learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom;
- learners who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects (adapted from Hallgarten and Rostworowska 1985:4).

Learner training, therefore, aims to provide learners with the alternatives from which to make informed choices about what, how, why, when and where they learn. This is not to say that they *have* to make all of these decisions all of the time. They may, indeed, choose to be teacher-dependent.

In order to be able to make such choices about their learning, it follows that the learners need to be informed about the language itself (through language awareness activities), about language learning techniques and processes (through experimentation and reflection) and about themselves as language learners (through regular self-assessment and introspection). We may hypothesise that as learners become more informed, so they will

be in a better position to make these decisions. They are then also more likely to be more effective and better motivated as learners.

Learner training is, then, related to the concept of learner autonomy in that it aims to provide learners with the *ability*, that is strategies and confidence, to take on more responsibility for their own learning, although it does not thrust autonomy upon them. Instead, its aim is to *prepare* learners for independence. It recognises that the state of complete autonomy is an ideal rarely attained in any sphere of life, since people live in societies where they are affected by and affect others. It recognises, too, that some people prefer not to be independent at all times in their learning. Nevertheless, learner training espouses the belief that everybody has the right to develop the capacity for taking charge of his or her own affairs and that this development is a basic function of education.

The idea of learner training is not new, but there has recently been a revival of interest in this dimension of language teaching and learning. For example, in connection with the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, Holec (1981:23) wrote: 'Teaching must also help the learner acquire autonomy for himself, i.e. to learn to learn'.

The revival is probably due to:

- the development of more learner-centred approaches, which have led to a greater focus on the learner as an individual and on the promotion of learner autonomy;
- the growth of a respect for the individual in society, in which the concept of autonomy is defined as the 'ability to assume responsibility for one's own affairs'*, and the opportunity to acquire this autonomy is viewed as a fundamental human right. This grew from the ideas of people such as Freire (1972), Illich (1973) and Rogers (1969) and has also led to a greater concern for the learners' linguistic and pedagogical rights (Gomes de Matos 1986).

As a result, many teachers have felt the need to expand their role (Wenden 1985b) by including, for example, language awareness activities, study skills, opportunities for learner choice and, more recently, by helping learners learn how to learn. The procedures and techniques for doing this have become known as learner training.

Learner training or learner development?

More recently the term *learner development* has been suggested for what we have described as *learner training*, leaving learner training more narrowly defined as the promotion of the characteristics and behaviour of the 'good language learner', as identified by recent research (Rubin 1975, Stern 1975 and Naiman et al. 1978 – see page 5). In our view,

* Schwartz, B. 1977. *L'Education demain*. Aubier Montaigne, Paris. Quoted in Holec (1981:3).

this definition represents a superficial interpretation of some very useful and influential studies and we would agree with Wenden (1985b:989) when she says, 'The term [learner training] should not be understood in a narrow sense as the rote teaching of discrete behaviours.'

The term 'training' may seem to imply that learners are indeed taught specific behaviours rather than being encouraged to discover what works best for them as individuals. We use this term, however, because it is widely used and recognised by our profession; we do not intend it to be understood as in any sense referring to a prescriptive approach.

Learner training and study skills

In recent years there has also been a growing interest in the area of study skills. Study skills for EFL and ESL, or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as this area is sometimes known, equip learners with the skills required in order to succeed in a particular study environment, which has its own set of conventions. For example, a course which prepares foreign students for study at a British university requires students to be proficient in such skills as taking notes, preparing for seminars, organising and presenting essays (Wallace 1980). Other examples of study skills might be learning how to use a particular dictionary or the school library.

It is often claimed that the aims of study skills are very similar to those of learner training – and there is indeed an overlap (see Fig. 1). Our view is that study skills form a part of learner training and that learner training is more far-reaching, for the following reasons:

1. In study skills objectives are usually imposed from some external source, such as a set syllabus, specific assessment procedures or a particular cultural setting (although learners may indeed have the freedom to choose *how* to achieve these objectives). Learner training provides learners with more opportunity to select their own learning objectives.
2. Study skills tend to focus on the particular *products* required by a specific study context, such as passing examinations or writing a good précis. Learner training focusses on the *process* of learning in order to provide learners with wider insights into their own learning.
3. Study skills tend to involve learners in specific tasks or activities directly related to the requirements of their course of study. Learner training tends to provide more opportunities for learners to reflect on their attitudes towards themselves as learners and their personal learning preferences, as well as to experiment with different learning and practice activities in general.
4. Study skills usually prepare learners for an external system of assessment. Learner training trains them in self-assessment.

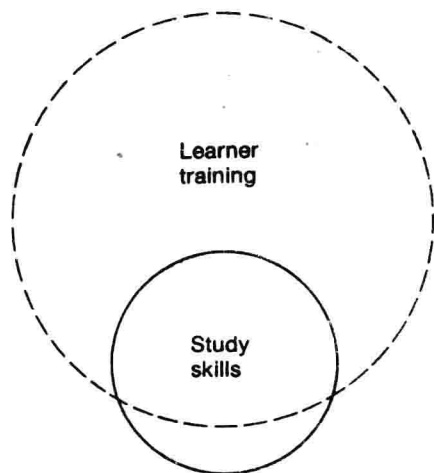


Figure 1

Learner training and the 'good language learner'

Despite the current interest in learner training and the acceptance of its value, it still remains a secondary concern in many foreign language classrooms. This may be partly due to the fact that 'our knowledge about language learning is still very incomplete' (Stern 1983:410) and partly because there are relatively few learner training materials and guidelines for teachers on the market.

Carroll suggested (1967:104) that biographies of individuals speaking more than one language might contain clues to the conditions of successful language acquisition. From this suggestion came the idea of studying good language learners. A number of studies were carried out (Rubin 1975, Stern 1975, Naiman et al. 1978 among others). These studies produced inventories of the characteristics and learning strategies of good language learners which, although cautious about the findings, provided some useful insights into the foreign language learning process.

Perhaps the most significant finding with regard to learner training is the fact that these studies highlighted 'the complex interplay of factors potentially affecting success in language learning' (Fröhlich and Paribakht 1984:71); the 'uniqueness and individuality of each language learning career . . . and the multitude of ways which can lead to success' (*ibid.*:70). In other words, each learner develops strategies and techniques which suit his or her individual needs and personality and implements these in different ways. Because of this, a definitive list of language learning strategies did not emerge, but the findings do allow certain generalisations, regardless of learner differences. Many of the

Introduction

characteristics and strategies identified overlapped and we have summarised them into the seven broad categories below. This categorisation was based on the conviction, supported by our own experience in the classroom, that it would make sense to the learners and therefore be appropriate as a basis for structuring a course of learner training.

As far as it is possible to generalise, good language learners are:

self aware

They are aware of and understand the reasons for their attitudes and feelings towards language learning and themselves as language learners. These attitudes are not necessarily positive, for example:

'I hate learning English grammar because I think it's illogical.'

'I don't enjoy speaking English because I'm afraid of making mistakes.'

inquisitive and tolerant

They are interested in finding out more about how the language works and how they can apply this knowledge to help them learn more effectively; for example:

'How is English grammar different from Italian grammar?'

'How many varieties of English are there and where are they spoken?'

They are also prepared to accept differences between their mother tongue and the target language and to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty.

self-critical

They assess themselves and monitor their progress regularly.

realistic

They realise that it takes a lot of hard work and time to learn a foreign language and set themselves realistic, manageable short-term aims to make their learning easier to manage and to see their progress. This can also help them to remain motivated.

willing to experiment

They are willing to try out different learning strategies and practice activities and choose those that suit them best.

actively involved

They actively involve themselves in language learning and have sufficient

confidence not to mind experimenting with the language and taking risks.

organised

They organise their time and materials in ways which suit them personally and fully exploit the language learning resources available to them inside and outside the classroom.

Although this research has provided us with useful insights into what possibly makes for successful language learning, we believe there are dangers inherent in taking these findings too literally. If we are not careful, the resulting learner training course may become so prescriptive that it defeats its aim of encouraging learners to discover what works best for them as individuals. Furthermore, how should we define 'good' or 'successful'? One individual's interpretation may differ from that of another. In addition, learners presented with such a list could feel overwhelmed by what may seem to be an unattainable ideal; this could lead to anxiety and demotivation.

In our view, although the 'good language learner' research can provide a basis for devising a course of learner training, such a course needs to address the above-mentioned problems (see page 10).

Learner training and materials

As already mentioned, another reason why learner training still remains a secondary concern in many language classrooms may be that there are relatively few learner training materials and guidelines for teachers on the market.

Dickinson and Carver (1980) identified three areas in which learners need preparation for learner autonomy, and which have also provided us with useful criteria for devising materials for learner training. These were:

psychological preparation, e.g. activities to build confidence for experimenting with language;

methodological preparation, e.g. activities to help learners understand and use metalanguage (language for describing language and language learning) and to become aware of the rationale behind classroom activities, such as pair work and drilling;

practice in self-direction, e.g. activities which provide learners with opportunities to make choices about their learning.

More recently it has been interesting to see how some aspects of learner training have begun to appear in published EFL and ESL materials

Introduction

(Whitney 1983 and 1985, Prowse and McGrath 1984, McDowell and Hart 1987, among others).

Learner training and the language learner

Learners bring into the classroom their own expectations about language learning, their teacher's role and their own roles. These expectations are often the result of past learning experiences and cultural background. Learner training can help learners of any age understand what is happening in the classroom and why. It may, however, be helpful to examine separately the problems of adults and younger learners.

Adult learners

Many adults returning to the classroom to learn a foreign language have come from a past learning experience which concentrated on studying grammar and structures and provided few opportunities to use the language as a means of communication. Consequently, these learners may find it difficult to come to terms with more learner-centred and communicative approaches and teachers may hear such comments as 'I don't see the point of talking to other students in pairs.' or 'Why don't you correct all our mistakes?'

It may be that many adults have already made several attempts to learn a foreign language, but each time have given up – perhaps because of an apparent lack of progress, or dissatisfaction with the classes, materials or teacher. Although they have specific needs, they often set themselves unrealistic aims. This, combined with their false expectations about methodology and their own progress, can lead to frustration, demotivation and ineffective learning. Furthermore, adult learners, upon returning to the classroom, often revert to the 'traditional' role of pupil who expects to be told what to do as well as how and when to do it. They expect the teacher to control all aspects of learning and, in so doing, relinquish the autonomy they would normally exert in other spheres of their lives. Learner training aims to restore to learners the control they exercise outside the classroom so that they may be in a position to manage their learning according to their individual preferences and needs.

Younger learners

Pupils starting to learn a foreign language are often highly motivated, but this initial interest tends to fade very quickly for a variety of reasons. Because of the constraints of many secondary school systems, such as a specific syllabus to cover, large classes, and limited time available for

language learning, pupils are rarely given the opportunity to reflect on and make choices about their own learning. Furthermore, younger learners are sometimes self-conscious in class, have short concentration spans, are easily bored and rarely see the wider relevance of learning a foreign language. Learner training can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- it can help learners maintain their initial motivation by encouraging them to become more actively and personally involved in their own learning, and by helping them build up their confidence and to perceive progress;
- learners are in a position where they can transfer their knowledge about learning to other subjects across the curriculum;
- it can help to prevent the ‘adult learner syndrome’ described above.

Learner training and language level

Although it may be dangerous to make assumptions about learners’ levels of awareness about language learning, and diagnoses can sometimes be misleading, we have found that language learners who could be described as ‘advanced’, that is post Cambridge First Certificate level, are probably already aware of which learning strategies work well for them. In our experience, learner training is most effective at lower-intermediate level, as the learners are usually able to complete activities in the target language, which provides additional language work, and already have some language learning experience to reflect on. At the same time, they are at a relatively early stage in their learning of English, where they may benefit from knowledge about language learning and about themselves as language learners.

As discussion is widely accepted to be an important technique in learner training, it may be preferable for lower-level learners to complete some of the discussion-based activities in their mother tongue or another common language. Experience has shown that there is no loss of the learner training benefits if the target language is not used. Discussion can take place in any language (s) learners feel comfortable in, although obviously at some point the whole group needs to have the use of a common language.

The more advanced your learners are in terms of language level and learning awareness, the less learner training they are generally likely to need; in this case it is important to negotiate and be selective. At this level learner training is more likely to be targeted at specific, more sophisticated, language learning or practice tasks, such as writing an academic paper, business report or school essay.

Learner training and the teacher's role

Many teachers have always been aware of the importance of helping learners 'learn how to learn' and have attempted to expand their roles to include not only language teaching but also aspects of learner training, as previously mentioned (see page 3). However, our investigations (Ellis and Sinclair, 1987) have shown that this is not always implemented in a principled and systematic way. In a systematic approach the teacher would play an instrumental role in learner training by:

- negotiating with learners about course content and methodology, if appropriate
- sharing with learners, in a way which is accessible to them, the kind of information about language and language learning that teachers have, but which is not always passed on to learners
- encouraging discussion in the classroom about language and language learning
- helping learners become aware of the wide range of alternative strategies available to them for language learning
- creating a learning environment where learners feel they can experiment with their language learning
- allowing learners to form their own conclusions about language learning and respecting individual points of view
- counselling and giving guidance to individual learners when possible.

The learner training in this book is partly teacher directed and partly learner directed. It is teacher directed in that the teacher provides much of the input about the language and about the learning process and presents alternative strategies – if the learners do not suggest these themselves – for experimentation and evaluation. The teacher is not intended to be prescriptive, however, and, in this respect, the *outcome* of the learner training is *learner directed*. It is the learner who decides which alternatives to adopt or reject.

The learner is regarded as an individual whose opinions and beliefs about learning are respected. He or she is encouraged to experiment and to choose and is provided with the necessary tools with which to do this. Learner and teacher are partners in learning; the teacher is the language learning 'expert' and the learner the 'expert' on him or herself.

Finally it is important to realise that no matter how principled and systematic the learner training may be, it is a gradual process and the teacher should not expect instant results. The main purpose of a learner training course is to *start* the learners on their own journeys towards self-knowledge and self-reliance.

2 Learning to Learn English

The framework

<i>Stage 1 Preparation for language learning</i>	
1.1 What do you expect from your course?	
1.2 What sort of language learner are you?	
1.3 Why do you need or want to learn English?	
1.4 How do you organise your learning?	
1.5 How motivated are you?	
1.6 What can you do in a self-access centre?	

<i>Stage 2 Skills training</i>	<i>How do you feel ...?</i>	<i>What do you know ...?</i>	<i>How well are you doing?</i>	<i>What do you need to do next?</i>	<i>How do you prefer to learn/practise ...?</i>	<i>Do you need to build up your confidence?</i>	<i>How do you organise ...?</i>
<i>Skills</i>	<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Step 3</i>	<i>Step 4</i>	<i>Step 5</i>	<i>Step 6</i>	<i>Step 7</i>
2.1 Extending vocabulary							
2.2 Dealing with grammar							
2.3 Listening							
2.4 Speaking							
2.5 Reading							
2.6 Writing							