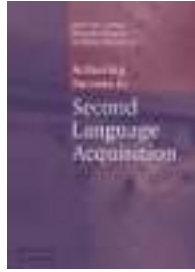


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Betty Lou Leaver, Madeline Ehrman, Boris Shekhtman

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Chapter

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Preview

Language learning – if one is to reach high levels of language proficiency – is a long-term commitment. After formal language study, many learners find themselves working independently. The topics in this chapter are related to working independently; they are also of benefit in the classroom since knowing about them can help with pacing and setting priorities. The topics in this chapter are about learning autonomy (taking control of one's own learning) and learner self-regulation (managing priorities, time, and feeling) and include:

- Myths about self-direction.
- Cognition in self-regulation.
- Affect in self-regulation.
- Interpersonal dimensions of learner autonomy.
- Teacher's role in self-regulated learning

It is an ideal and frequent goal in language teaching that learners will be able to manage their own learning when they leave the classroom and get into the real world of native speakers, newspapers, and films. There is much validity to this goal. The more you can manage your own learning while benefiting from formal instruction, the more likely it is that you will have tools for learning in unstructured settings too. Autonomous learning is influenced by all of the cognitive and affective factors we described in chapters 3, 4 and 5; here we pull together a number of those themes to describe how you can take more control of your own learning.

We have grouped self-regulation and autonomy together in this chapter because learner autonomy depends on effective self-regulation. In Part I (Learning), we looked at both cognitive and affective matters; both of these play important roles in self-regulation and learner autonomy, as do the interpersonal and group phenomena also described in Part I.

Some myths about self-directed learning

Many people hold some beliefs about learning on one's own, or directing one's own learning. Some of the most common are discussed below.

Adults are naturally self-directed learners

This belief has a corollary: children must be taught. The truth is that both children and adults sometimes learn on their own and sometimes require learning support. Everyone relies on instruction (though it may be informal, like guidance from a friend on a craft) some of the time and learns independently at other times (e.g. looking up a topic of interest in the library or on the Internet). Some personalities and cognitive styles are likely to insist on more autonomy than others; for example, inductive and random learners may tend to want relatively more independence than deductive or sequential ones.

Self-direction is all-or-nothing

This is, in fact, pure myth. Clearly, as indicated above, we all vary our learning approaches depending on what is being learned, our previous knowledge and self-confidence with it, and how energetic we are feeling, among other things. At earlier stages of learning something, we are more likely to want outside support (instruction, syllabus) than later. Even in later stages of learning, when there is something very new to master, we may cycle back to wanting more direct support.

Self-directed learning is done in isolation

As we shall see later in this chapter, self-direction is normally done in the context of other people and in social settings. Other people are frequently an important part of an independently developed learning plan. Important theorists like Vygotsky (1962) emphasize the importance of interactions with more knowledgeable others in an unconscious process of increasing knowledge and skill.

Cognition in self-regulation

Factors involved in self-regulation reflect emotional and cognitive development. This level of development is characterized by:

- the ability to function within a social unit;
- the possession of good metacognitive skills;
- trust in self and others; and the ability to
- set and pursue goals, tolerate frustration and compromise with reality, manage the multiple demands of life (work, interpersonal relations, value formation), and think abstractly.

The social unit

Being able to work independently while also accepting direction is an important part of self-regulation. This does not at all contradict the need to take initiative for your own learning, which is an important part of learner autonomy. You do need to come up with ideas of your own and ways to implement them, but you also need to keep in mind that you are probably part of social units, too. These social units are likely to require that you modify and even withhold your initiatives and that you be aware of your social obligations. Autonomy is decidedly not isolation.

Good metacognitive skills

Self-direction is impossible without good metacognitive skills (see chapter 2). Much of self-direction takes the form of “thinking about thinking.” Skills in planning, monitoring yourself (either at the time or afterwards), assessing effectiveness of strategies, and even making up strategies for yourself are both metacognitive and important for self-regulation.

So setting and pursuing your goals form essential elements of self-regulation. You have to be able to decide what you want to learn and find ways to do so. At the same time, you need to remember that you will not always meet with success. Coping with the frustration of delayed or even failed plans is as important as making them in the first place. Self-regulation requires a “Plan B.”

Trust in self and others

Self-regulation is a kind of balancing act. You need to believe in your own capacity to cope with difficulties, and yet you also need to trust others enough to let them (or ask them to) help you when you realize you cannot do everything on your own. Similarly, you need to be able to balance independent work planned, executed, and evaluated by you, with direction from outside, as in a classroom. Although you are responsible for learning and for knowing what you are learning for, the teacher is responsible for orchestrating events in the classroom. Further, you need to compromise with reality: you will not get everything you want when you want it (and maybe not at all), and yet you need to seek what you need and want in spite of the fact that you may not get it.

Abstract thinking

To self-regulate well, you need to think abstractly. This includes such mental activities as shifting your focus from one aspect of a situation to another while keeping several aspects in mind at the same time. You must both grasp the whole picture and analyze its components, synthesizing new with old

The self-regulated learner

When they begin to study, self-regulated learners set goals for extending knowledge and sustaining motivation. They are aware of what they know, what they believe, and what the differences between these kinds of information imply for approaching tasks. They understand their motivation, are aware of their affect, and plan how to manage the interplay between these as they engage with a task. They also deliberate about small-grain tactics [strategies for handling specific, narrow tasks and situations] and overall strategies, selecting some instead of others based on predictions about how each is able to support progress toward chosen goals. Or on rational grounds, they may abandon the task entirely. (Winne, 1995, p. 173)

Figure 9.1

and apparently disparate elements, forming hierarchic concepts, planning ahead, envisaging possibilities, and making use of symbols (Wolfe and Kolb, 1984).

These are complex tasks. For example goal setting entails awareness, expectation of success, psychological safety, goals that can be measured, self-controlled evaluation, and the belief that one can exercise at least some control in a situation (Kolb and Boyatzis, 1984).

A description of a self-regulated learner is presented in figure 9.1. It reminds us that knowing when to persist and when to quit in the face of impossible odds is another key to effective regulation of your own learning.

Tricks of the trade

Those who self-regulate well do a number of things that make them successful. You can apply these same “tricks” in your own learning. Some of them are discussed below. These include:

- setting achievable goals;
- staying aware of your feelings;
- keeping aware of your options;
- anticipating difficulties;
- prioritizing;
- increasing versatility;
- being realistic;
- depending on others;
- being independent where you can.

Setting achievable goals

It is easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of a foreign language, especially if you set vague goals like “learn the language in two weeks.” Instead, set multiple small, near-term goals, rather than single, large, and more distant ones (Winne, 1995). Not only do you maintain some control over yourself and

your learning, you also can get quicker and better targeted feedback on whether what you have tried is working.

Staying aware of your feelings

Try to stay aware of your feelings, both positive and negative. Use some of the feeling management tactics described in chapter 4. If you are aware that something “turns you off,” you can try to find ways to work around it. (This is, in fact, a cognitive tactic even though you are dealing with feelings, because you are noticing and thinking about your feelings and how to handle them.)

Keep aware of your options

Keep aware of your options and avoid closing them off prematurely. It is possible that lack of success in one of your efforts might have a simple cause that you can fix easily.

Anticipate difficulties

Anticipate difficulties and prepare to meet them with a good action plan or a set of practical options. That is to say, if Plan A does not work, it’s useful to have a Plan B and Plan C. They need not be fully formed, but some kind of backup ideas will maintain options and will provide the feeling that you are unlikely to fail because you have multiple paths.

Prioritizing

You can’t do everything all at once, so do what matters most at the time. Set priorities. For example, you can pick and choose words to learn, grammar to focus on, and learning strategies, based on your current state of knowledge, your interests, and your learning style.

Increasing your versatility

Try some things that are outside your learning style to increase your versatility. If you tend toward impulsivity, for instance, try slowing down, counting to ten (or at least five) before acting, or checking your work. On the contrary, if you are more comfortable thinking things through, try doing a timed task: set a timer and when it goes off, the task should be complete. If it is not, try again and again, until your speed matches the timer. (Yes, your accuracy will likely go down; that is okay.)

Being realistic

Check your beliefs. One of the most damaging things you can believe is that learning should be rapid and knowledge without ambiguities. Experienced and effective learners understand that *learning can be slow, uneven, and gradual*, and they know that most of life is colored in shades of grey.

CASE STUDY

Problem

Valerie is beginning to feel completely lost in her Arabic class. Her teacher keeps telling her that she can figure out grammar rules for herself. She knows that she cannot do that. Not only is Arabic grammar very complicated for her, but in general she prefers someone to explain things to her before she tries to use them. So, how can she survive?

Possible solutions

Valerie can approach taking charge of her own learning in several ways:

- (1) She can learn more about her learning style. Her teacher is trying to help her become more autonomous, but she is probably a deductive learner and would work better if she got the rules first. She does not have to depend on the teacher for explanations, however. There are grammar books (written for students) that she can use to get the explanations; she can also try to “stretch” and see if she can figure out at least some of the rules before turning to a rule book.
- (2) She can talk to her teacher about her learning needs (in a mutually respectful way) and see what she can negotiate.
- (3) She can seek assistance from classmates, who may have worked out the rules.

Figure 9.2

Depending on others

Allow yourself to depend on teachers, syllabus, textbooks, and other external guidance for as long as you need them. Not everyone can operate independently equally fast, and pushing yourself to autonomy before you are ready for it can be destructive to effective learning and to your self-confidence.

Being independent where you can

On the other hand, take over as much self-regulation as your knowledge and circumstances permit, as soon as you are ready. Some people may be ready to take a lot of control almost immediately, especially random learners (see chapter 3); others may need quite a lot more time before they are ready to manage most of their learning. Sooner or later, though, everyone can take some responsibility for learning even if it's only deciding what order to do your homework and when to take study breaks.

Affect in self-regulation

Although such cognitive activities as synthesizing, planning, and evaluation of your learning are the heart of self-regulation, you have probably experienced or observed how seriously feelings like stress, anxiety, or response to

threat can disrupt these processes. On the other hand, cognition can also be greatly enhanced by positive feelings, such as motivation, well-being, and self-efficacy.

Motivation for independent learning

Much has been written about motivation and language learning, and an equal amount has been written about motivation and self-regulation in all forms of learning. Why is motivation important? First of all, learning is change, and change is difficult. Motivation underpins keeping up the emotional, intellectual, and physical effort needed to achieve change (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998).

Motivation promotes effort, i.e. time on task. This is the most basic condition for learning: the more time you spend on learning (and using effective strategies), the more you can take in, keep in, and retrieve when you need it. If you really want to achieve proficiency, you will expose yourself to the language as much as your circumstances permit. In a related vein, motivation leads to persistence when you are having difficulties. Persistence, together with well-targeted learning strategies, can often overcome limitations of ability and environment.

Anxiety and autonomy

Anxiety and stress are among the most powerful agents for derailing self-regulation. If you are overwhelmed by your feelings, your cognitive learning resources are diminished. Your abstract reasoning suffers, and you are likely to be taken over by your defense mechanisms, frequently immature ones. Such tactics for coping with anxiety and stress often attempt to protect self-esteem, but you pay a high price for your defensive position.

Self-regulation in the affective domain entails:

- Awareness of what you are feeling and what is bothering you;
- Reducing the intensity of negative feelings;
- Reframing and “choosing your battles;”
- Focusing on the positive and selecting helpful environments; and
- Attempting to use mature defenses (see chapter 4).

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a great help in self-regulation. If you know you’re feeling unhappy or anxious, rather than ignoring it, you can take some kind of action to keep it from hindering you (see some of the suggestions in chapter 4). It is surprising how much we can take our feelings for granted and assume that the way they are is how they have to be. Getting more information about what is bothering you can be very helpful. Is it something immediate in the classroom, such as making too many mistakes for your comfort, in the environment, e.g. style conflict, or something not related at all, such as a spat with a friend? Knowledge is a form of control, and it tells you where to look for solutions.

Reducing negative feelings

Attempt to turn down the “affective volume” when you are upset or anxious. If you are only hearing the bad feelings, there is little room for anything else, especially learning. Try distraction from what is bothering you or some of the other techniques mentioned in chapter 4 or this chapter.

Reframing

An extremely powerful technique is reframing your situation so that you see it in different terms. One of the authors illustrates reframing with a cartoon of a dog chained to a doghouse saying to a cat, “The reason they don’t tie you up is because they want you to run away.” The dog is turning a difficult circumstance (restriction) into a positive one (the owners care about him and want him to stay), and dealing with envy of the cat by turning the situation around in his favor. A related technique is choosing your “battles” – decide where you will expend your emotional resources, and find ways to avoid or sidestep the others. Reframing can help: after you have turned as much of the situation around in your mind as you can, you may know where the real problems are and be able to work on those.

Focusing on the positive

You may know that there are negative things going on, but do you have to keep thinking about them, to the detriment of your effectiveness? The only reason for ruminating about bad things is if it helps you solve problems.

Where possible, attempt to use relatively mature defense mechanisms, such as humor, altruism, or sublimation (cross-reference). These are likely to help you reclaim your cognitive resources. To the degree you can, select helpful environments where you feel work, study, or social success. Avoid to the degree possible situations that are toxic to you, or if you cannot avoid them, try using techniques like reframing, choosing your battles, and focus on what is good. Unless it’s required, like a class, normally you don’t have to spend a lot of time with people or in places where you don’t feel good.

Interpersonal dimensions of learner autonomy

It may be that when you hear the terms *autonomous* or *independent*, you think of someone studying all alone. Actually, other people can play a number of important roles in autonomous, self-regulated learning. As we know, they can be sources of stress, but here we examine how they can help reduce tension and facilitate your independent learning.

We have seen that cognitive and metacognitive functions essential to self-regulation can be disrupted or enhanced by feelings. Frequently, such feelings arise from our relations with others: classmates, teachers, and family. These other

CASE STUDY

Problem

When Valerian began learning Greek, he was very excited and enthusiastic. He spent a lot of time on his homework and even did extra work. Now he has become more apathetic. He is tired of making so many mistakes and is beginning not to care about his language class; in fact, he is thinking of dropping it. What now?

Possible solutions

Valerian can use one or more of the following to deal with his “problem:”

- (1) He can step back from the study for a while so he can get some perspective. A day or so doing something completely different could help.
- (2) He can talk with someone, possibly his teacher or an experienced language learner, about what is causing him to feel this way.
- (3) He can try some reframing. It is useful to keep in mind that if you’re not making mistakes, you may not be learning much. He may have lost sight of this fact.
- (4) He can decide whom he fears, i.e. whose opinion will make him feel bad. Then he can decide what to say to these people (silently) to get them off his emotional back. He should note that most likely he is his own worst critic.

Figure 9.3

people can have a profound effect on motivation, well-being, self-efficacy, and anxiety, because it matters to us how they feel about us (and how we feel about them). They have an influence not only on our sense of security with others but also on our self-concept.

The class

The atmosphere in the classroom or the nature of the group dynamics there raises or lowers anxiety and motivation. Coercion reduces motivation; personal investment in tasks increases it. To the degree that we build our self-image and our self-esteem from how others reflect us back to ourselves, we are likely to have greater or lesser self-efficacy as autonomous learners.

Other people

Finding social support is a key strategy to surviving an uncomfortable classroom situation. That means other people, like friends, advisors, teachers, relatives, and others you like and who like you. They can be among the best stress-reducers by listening (a truly powerful help) and providing sympathy and encouragement. Sometimes they provide useful advice, but of course it remains up to you to decide whether to take the advice or not. Of course, from others

you get information, ranging from the next day's assignment if you missed it to knowledge they have that we do not.

Remember, too, that other people provide models for you to follow. For example, you can learn about self-regulation from models provided by other people, both in and outside of the classroom. Look at how they make plans and choices and how they manage their time. Ask the ones who seem especially successful about what they do. You can also pick up learning strategies from others, either directly or by observation. If it's working for someone else, it might work for you, too, some of the time. Try it out and see.

In addition to serving as models, other people play an important role in helping you define your goals and values, because you pick up social norms from the people in your life who matter to you. For example, you may have learned that it is important to be honest because your family and friends value it highly. Other people also provide reference points for us to aspire and measure ourselves against. Many students like being with classmates who learn faster or are more advanced, because not only do they learn things from the classmates, they also have something realistic to aim for.

Fellow learners can share the workload. It does not mean less autonomy for you to participate in study or project groups, especially if you have built that kind of activity into your planning. They can also help you when you get "stuck" with something. It's part of self-regulation to know when to call for help. It can also be enormously encouraging to you to provide help to others; it validates your skill and makes you a part of the social network that is essential to "the human animal." Social support can bring about a sense that you are valued: just the fact that others find you worth the investment of their time can be a boost to fraying self-esteem, and you can give the same to others.

Finally, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) indicate how other people are very much involved in our defensive maneuvers. For example, at the constructive end, joking and humor are normally very social activities, as are projection and blaming in the less constructive area. It's hard to blame without someone else as the target, and humor is much more effective when there's someone else to share it. (Blaming isn't usually a very good way to deal with perceived failure, though. It is better to be sure that you aren't trying to shift responsibility that is yours before you cast blame.)

Teacher's roles in promoting learner autonomy

Among the most important figures in the growth of learning autonomy is your teacher. Just as good parenting allows dependence when it is appropriate for a child but encourages independence when the child is ready, so a good teacher provides support as it is needed and lets go when the student is ready to "fly solo." (In education-speak, this is called "scaffolding," as when a building is supported until it can stand on its own.)

CASE STUDY

Problem

Patti and Paula are classmates and friends. Patti is having no particular trouble with her learning and is even taking on a lot of planning, monitoring of her work, and changing course where necessary. Her classmate, Paula, is not having as easy a time. She is becoming dependent on Patti and beginning to take up a lot of her time. What can Patti do without rejecting Paula or destroying her friendship?

Possible solutions

It may be gratifying to have the admiration and interest of a classmate, but it also can become confining. Patti should consider carefully how much she wants to have Paula depend on her. There are some ways that she can both help Paula and maintain her sanity and “space.”

- (1) She can think about some things to suggest to Paula that will help her work on her own more.
- (2) She should decide on the role she can best take on: e.g. mentor, cheerleader, sympathetic ear. Then, she should try to set some limits on that role and perhaps suggest other people who could fill some of the other roles.
- (3) She could also share strategies that have helped her become more autonomous.

Figure 9.4

Teachers play a multitude of roles in your learning, far too many to address here. But here are a few that they play in enhancing your independence:

- guide;
- cheerleader;
- role model; and
- motivator.

Guide

As a guide, teachers provide initial goals and guidelines to learners without enough information to make those decisions for themselves. This applies to most novices, who usually need guidance until they build up some expertise and knowledge. If the teacher provides too much or too little guidance, you need to be aware of this and find ways to cope. In the former case, which is likely to affect random and inductive learners in particular, you can find ways to meet the teacher’s goals for your learning, but do it your way if that works better for you. (You could try the teacher’s way first, just to see if you can pick up any new strategies.) In the latter case, sequential and deductive learners are likely to be most affected, and in that case, you can seek to make your own sequences and logical outlines, find organized references, and if necessary let the teacher know that you are getting lost and could use more guidance.

Table 9.1

| Person or group | Help or hinder? | How | Comment |
|--------------------|-----------------|--|---|
| Anne | Hinders | Keeps talking when I want a chance to talk | I need to be more assertive to get my turn |
| The neighbor's dog | Hinders | Too noisy | Bring this up with the neighbor; try to have a constructive solution to offer |
| Jonathan | Helps | Is always encouraging | Am I giving him the same thing back? |

Cheerleader

As cheerleader, the teacher encourages (and may discourage) you. This can be an important part of developing the “learning alliance” (see chapter 4) that has you and your teacher as teammates working toward the same goal. A teacher whose interest in your success is obvious will help you want to have more success. Of course the teacher also has the power to reward and punish by providing or withholding approval; if you need the rewards of good grades (and most of us want them), it will help to be aware of this fact and distinguish between adaptation to a temporary situation and what you really prefer.

Role model

Having a role model is especially important in language learning, where you may be building a foreign language identity. If the teacher is a native speaker, this is much easier than if she or he is not, but even in the latter case the teacher can represent the foreign culture and language to some degree. The teacher can be someone to internalize and model yourself on, someone whose speech and behavior can be imitated.

Motivator

Most of us are motivated by another person's interest in our worlds, both in and outside of the classroom. A teacher's interest in you and in your success can increase your desire for that success. Furthermore, a teacher who finds out your interests and helps you explore them is likely to enhance your interest in the language. For example, if you are interested in science more than literature, such a teacher will bring some recent scientific discoveries into the discussion from time to time and will help you find reading matter that is both interesting and at an appropriate level of difficulty for you.

Practice what you have learned!

1. List some ways that you are already regulating yourself. Here's a starter checklist (but far from complete):
 - a. Plan how to use homework time
 - b. Use references without prompting
 - c. Ask questions when I can't figure it out for myself
 - d. Manage how much I expect myself to be able to do in a given period of time, such as a week, a month, or a semester
 - e. Understand my learning style (and something of that of others) so that I can negotiate with my teacher or seek compatible learning opportunities outside the classroom
 - f. Track my list of things to do
 - g. Take opportunities to review on my own
 - h. Evaluate my progress and review the strategies I'm using.
2. Find a small task that doesn't take a lot of thinking, such as washing the dishes. Break it down into steps as you do it (you will need to observe yourself). Here is a starter list for dishwashing:
 - a. notice dirty dishes in sink
 - b. think about washing them
 - c. think about whether it can be postponed
 - d. if not, think about what you will need to do the job
 - e. check to make sure that soap and scrubbers are there
 - f. clear the sink if necessary to make room to work (entails making a judgement about the amount of space in the sink and where to put the dirty dishes)
 - g. etc.
3. Now try to do the same thing with a language-learning task. Make it one that is low pressure and where you are alone and undistracted, since you will have to do two things at once: the task itself, and observing and taking notes as you do it.

 How parallel were the routine and the learning tasks?
 Do you need to change the way you work in language? How?
4. List all the people and groups who are involved in your learning. Indicate if they help, hinder, do both, and how. Table 9.1 on p. 212 is a starter sample.

Review

In this chapter, you considered these themes:

- Some myths and misunderstandings about learner autonomy
- Different levels of interaction
- Self-regulation leading to autonomy

- Cognition in self-regulation
- Affect in self-regulation
- Interpersonal dimensions of self-regulation
- Teachers' roles

Myths about autonomous learning

- (1) Autonomous learning is done by people of all ages.
- (2) It's not all or nothing.
- (3) Self-directed doesn't mean isolated: other people are important to self-directed learning.

Cognition in self-regulation

- (1) Most of the processes we use to think, such as planning, making hypotheses, and setting priorities, apply to self-directed language learning as well as to instructed learning.
- (2) Coping strategies include planning, breaking big tasks down into little ones ("chunking"), looking for ways to work around difficulties, keeping aware of options, setting priorities so you do not try to do everything at once, accepting help and using instructional resources.

Affect in self-regulation

- (1) Motivation helps you work through frustration and difficulty and keeps you on task.
- (2) Anxiety can diminish your ability to self-regulate, because it takes away cognitive and affective resources you need to manage yourself and your learning.
- (3) Tips for coping include being aware of your feelings, finding ways like distracting yourself to lower the "volume," reframing to see a bad-seeming situation in other terms, and using more mature defenses as much as you can.

Interpersonal dimensions

- (1) The positive roles others play for you and that you play for them include listening and giving emotional support, serving as models and resources for autonomous strategies, sharing the workload (e.g. in study groups), and participating in our defensive maneuvers.
- (2) Teachers can contribute a lot to your growing autonomy by modeling for you, encouraging you, and by giving you the support you need but no more (or they can get in its way). Among their most important roles in supporting your autonomy are guide, cheerleader, role model, and motivator.

If you want to learn more about the topics in this chapter, you will find the following references useful: Aoki (1999); Dickinson (1995); Dickinson and Wenden, eds. (1995); Ehrman (1998b); Ehrman (2000); Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998); Vygotsky (1962).