

## INDIVIDUAL LEARNER, PEER GROUP AND TEACHER ROLES IN FOSTERING AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE-LEARNING BEHAVIOUR

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### Abstract

*This article presents work in progress on developing an approach to cultivating learner autonomy. The learners concerned are undergraduate students on an advanced English course at Tampere University of Applied Sciences in Finland. About half of the students are Finnish; the others represent nine other nationalities and mother-tongues. The students are working towards a bachelor's degree in Environmental Engineering; the language of teaching and learning on this degree programme is English.*

*Such students might be assumed to have a strong self-interest in developing their English skills. However, external motivation to develop language proficiency is an insufficient condition for adopting autonomous language-learning behaviours. The approach presented here is based on the premise that teachers and peers can assist the learning-to-learn process for individual students. The roles and responsibilities of the different parties (individual learners, peers and teacher) are explored. The limitations, particularly the difficulty of achieving measurable outcomes, are also considered.*

**Key words:** *language learning, learner autonomy, learning-to-learn, undergraduate, peer group, roles, autonomous learner behaviour, motivation*

### 1. EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

This article reports on work in progress towards cultivating a more autonomous, self-directed attitude towards learning English among full-time undergraduates at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Finland. The article documents an advanced English course and reflects on the process in the light of research into learner autonomy. The course teacher is the writer of this article. The students participating in the course are all enrolled on a four-year international study programme leading to a bachelor's degree in Environmental Engineering (ENVE). The language of teaching and learning on this degree programme is English, which is the only language common to all members of the class. About half of the students are Finnish; the others represent nine other nationalities and mother-tongues.

### 2. AUTONOMY: TERMINOLOGY, HISTORY AND CONCEPT

Within pedagogical circles, "autonomy" and "autonomous" have become the accepted terms for the kind of learner behaviour where the learner assumes control over his/her own learning (Smith 2008). I have therefore followed this terminological consensus, although terms such as "learner independence", "self-managed learning", "self-directed learning" and other variants have been used at different times by different writers to refer to the same phenomenon.

Where language learning is concerned, most writers on autonomy acknowledge a debt to Henri Holec, long-serving director of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) at the Université de Nancy in France until he retired in 1998, and member of the panel of experts on modern languages at the Council of Europe. In both roles, Holec researched, wrote about and strongly advocated autonomous language learning (Riley 2013). Holec's work was rooted in the context of self-access education for adults, but at the same time, a separate strand of development was taking place in the context of classroom-based language learning, with Leni Dam as one of the prime movers (Smith 2008 p.7). The two strands came together in the mid-80s, as practitioners in both areas noticed commonalities. But to be clear, the present study fits into the classroom-based tradition of learner autonomy and is not primarily concerned with self-access.

Holec defined autonomy succinctly as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec 1981, p.3). Thanasoulas, citing Dam (1990), provides a more elaborated definition: “...someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation” (Thanasoulas 2000, p.2). Inherent in this view is willingness on the part of the learners to take on these learning responsibilities, and “sustain positive motivational attitudes towards the learning task” (Legenhausen 2009 p.380).

People studying full-time in an educational institution might reasonably ask why they should be willing to undertake these responsibilities, surrounded as they are by an extensive edifice of expertise peopled with professionals who are employed specifically to make almost all the choices which autonomous learners are supposed to make for themselves. Advocates of autonomy reply that autonomous learning is, quite simply, better learning, whatever the learning context. Those who recommend it believe “...that taking an active, independent attitude to learning and independently undertaking a learning task, is beneficial to learning; that somehow, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning” (Dickinson 1995 p.165).

### 3. MOTIVATION FOR UNDERTAKING THE STUDY

My own interest in cultivating a more autonomous attitude among students towards developing their English skills arose from a perception that many of them are excessively teacher-dependent. Their style of communication tends to be constrained by teacher-learner roles. They expect, and even request, plentiful feedback from the teacher, but then fail to exploit it for learning purposes. With a traditional teacher-directed approach, such students can perform well and even achieve a high grade at the end of the course, but do not necessarily learn how to develop their own language skills independently once the course is over. In view of the fact that degree programmes at Finnish universities of applied sciences aim to prepare undergraduates for an increasingly globalised world of work, in which bi-lingualism, and possibly multi-lingualism, will be the norm, a different approach was clearly called for.

The observations made above do not by any means apply only to Environmental Engineering (ENVE) students at TAMK. Indeed, the same comments can be applied equally to undergraduates on all of the degree programmes that I have been involved with, and probably other teachers will recognise some commonalities with their own students. I chose an English course for ENVE students as the focus for this article because I judged that these learners would be amenable to the idea of developing their English skills autonomously, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the communication demands of studying entirely in English require that ENVE students are fairly proficient in the language from the beginning of the programme. To ensure as far as possible that the students’ English is adequate to the challenge, the skills of applicants to the ENVE programme are tested as part of a compulsory entrance examination. Furthermore, only applicants who hold a TOEFL certificate or equivalent are invited to participate in the entrance exam. These students are therefore experienced and relatively successful learners of English, who already possess some language learning strategies. However, admission criteria for the ENVE programme clearly prioritise maths skills and knowledge of basic science over English, where applicants only need to demonstrate that their skills are adequate to purpose. As a result, the level of English proficiency of newly admitted students varies quite considerably, and this variation persists.

#### 3.1 Needs for proficient English among ENVE students

Secondly, as a group, ENVE students have long-term ambitions which will depend for their fulfilment on a high level of proficiency in English. A majority of the students, Finns and foreigners alike, cite the opportunity to study in English as a factor in their decision to apply for the ENVE degree; they see it as a gateway to post-graduate study, and to careers in different countries, in multi-national companies or in international institutions. They therefore have strong instrumental motivation to maintain their English skills at a high level beyond graduation.

In the shorter term, too, ENVE students have reason to understand the desirability of being able to develop their English skills autonomously. The course which is the focus of this article is the last formal English teaching that the students will receive during their degree studies. But major communication challenges loom ahead in the middle distance, including the requirement to write a bachelor's thesis in English.

These students more than most, therefore, need tools for self-development of their English skills - tools which they can experiment with under guidance during the course, then continue to refine independently beyond the end of their bachelor studies.

### 3.2 Factors inhibiting autonomous learning

Some readers may be harbouring the view that if only teachers and the education establishment did not conspire to prevent it happening, autonomous language learning would "come naturally" to learners. Undoubtedly students do exist who develop independently the qualities necessary for autonomous learning; I have even met some. But anyone who expects students to take to the air of autonomous learning *en masse*, like racing pigeons released from a cage, surely underestimates the level of challenge involved.

The challenge arises from a number of factors which militate against the spontaneous development of autonomous language development behaviour. Where individual ENVE students are concerned, the factors listed below apply to a greater or lesser extent. With some adaptations, the same issues probably apply to a wide range of educational contexts.

- Students tend to be comfortable with traditional teacher and learner roles, especially when the teacher-directed approach has served them well in the past.
- In the short-term, students are under pressure from the management of their institutions, educational officialdom and (in state-supported education systems) tax-payers to prioritise steady accumulation of study credit over deep and meaningful learning. Credit is most reliably achieved by following the teacher's instructions.
- ENVE undergraduates tend to see themselves first and foremost as students of science, and only incidentally as linguists. This self-image predisposes them to prioritise field-specific study areas over developing their English.
- Autonomous learning is difficult, requiring considerable mental effort, capacity for self-management and special know-how. Even highly motivated, active and well-organised students sometimes fail to achieve results commensurate with the effort invested because they are using ineffective language-development strategies.

## 4. THE TEACHER'S CHALLENGE IN FOSTERING AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE-LEARNING BEHAVIOUR

So far, I have proposed that autonomous learning behaviour brings long-term benefits to people who wish to develop their language proficiency beyond the end of formal language education. I have also argued that, for most learners, autonomous behaviour is unlikely to develop spontaneously, which leads to the conclusion that a place exists in language education for teacher-guided learning-to-learn activities. From Thanasoulas's description quoted in section 2 above (Thanasoulas 2000 p.2), we are aware of the characteristics that autonomous learners possess. It only remains to work out how teachers might go about assisting students to acquire strategies for autonomous language development. Godwin-Jones summarises the challenge for teachers as follows:

...developing learner autonomy does not just involve putting appropriate learning materials in front of a student, but necessitates helping the student develop the skills and mindset that can lead to successful self-guided language study. (2011 p.4)

Godwin-Jones goes on to point out that "the student needs to have the proper motivation for independent study" (2011 p.2). Research on motivation as a success factor in language learning goes back decades. Littlewood, for example, maintained that "...motivation is the crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres" (1984 p.53). This suggests that students with strong initial motivation to embark on

learning a language will stand a better chance of success than others. Insofar as ENVE students need English proficiency in order to obtain their bachelor's degree and fulfil longer-term ambitions, we are off to a good start.

However, while this means-to-an-end, instrumental type of motivation is useful for providing initial impetus, it may not be sufficient to "sustain positive motivational attitudes" towards language learning long enough for autonomous learning habits to develop. For this to happen, learners need to have their motivation regularly recharged until it is self-sustaining. In this respect, intrinsic motivation, that is, interest in language learning for its own sake, has been found by some researchers to be more effective than the instrumental kind (Ramage 1990; Deci and Ryan 1985, reported in Dickinson 1995 p.169). Indeed, Deci and Ryan found a clear association between intrinsic motivation, autonomous learning and the additional factor of "informational feedback" (1985, reported in Dickinson 1995 p.169). The theory is that learners who undertake language-learning tasks out of intrinsic interest initially will have that motivation reinforced if they can exercise some choice over the work done *and* if they receive information about how successfully they manage to communicate in the target language. This informational type of feedback is contrasted with "controlling feedback", which is the kind that assigns grades and compares learners with each other (Dickinson 1995 p.169).

On the question of the relative advantages of intrinsic and instrumental motivation course teachers have no need to take sides, since we cannot retrofit our students with the "right kind" of motivation to suit our own convenience. However, while learners are within our sphere of influence, we can attempt to stimulate their interest in adopting autonomous learning behaviour by any means at our disposal.

## **5. THE ADVANCED ENGLISH COURSE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING (ENVE) STUDENTS AT TAMK**

### *5.1 Practicalities*

At the time of writing (March 2014), the advanced English course which is the focus of this article is in progress. It is a compulsory course for Environmental Engineering students and is intended for those in their second year of study. In their first year at TAMK, these students participated in two English courses, which were integrated with a field-specific course called Terrestrial Ecosystems; for this learning module, the students wrote a literature-based essay and a number of scientific reports.

The advanced English course discussed in this article also focuses on formal writing in English because:

- a) the students' work on their first-year courses revealed that writing is challenging for all of them, including the native speakers.
- b) writing is an essential skill for all the students now, and for most of them will continue to be so beyond graduation.
- c) writing English, as part of a "balanced diet" of English learning activities, can promote proficiency in all language skill areas.
- d) written text can be planned in advance, thought about while work is in progress, and examined and re-examined by different people after completion. It is therefore open to a reflective, mindful approach to language development.

The current course runs from January to April over a period of fourteen weeks. In most weeks, the students have a three-hour classroom session with the teacher, and some independent work is set as homework. Occasionally, a more time-consuming task is assigned and the students are free to use the classroom session as they see fit, without teacher guidance. We use an online learning environment, Tabula, for course management. I use it as a depository for course materials and task descriptions; the students use it to access materials, post contributions to discussion forums and submit assignments.

## 5.2 The students

The course participants are an international group of twenty-five Environmental Engineering undergraduates. About half of the students (n=12) are Finnish; the other half comprises students from nine different countries and four continents. After the Finns, the biggest single national group (n=5) is from Russia. The students' mother-tongues are similarly varied (n=10). Two members of the class are native English speakers, while the three African students have used English for educational and other official purposes, alongside a local language used for communication within the family and immediate social circle. Most of the participants are in their second year of study, but a couple of them are third-year students. The foreign students are thus well acclimatised to life in Finland. The group is familiar with the study environment and culture of TAMK, and *esprit de corps* seems to be rather strong.

## 6. COURSE PROCESS AND DISTRIBUTION OF WORK

### 6.1 Getting started

At the beginning of the course, the students' first task was to think about the aspects of writing English which they find difficult, and to write these points down on a common sheet of paper with a view to improving their writing individually in these specific areas. The list for the whole class included micro-level issues such as using commas (14 mentions) as well as highly generalised issues such as improving flow and cohesion (9 mentions). The desire to improve their scientific and technical vocabulary was mentioned by 22 students, making it by far the most widespread concern of this class. The full list is given in appendix i. I did not edit the list or steer the students' choices, by pointing out, for example, that more thoughtful use of commas on the writer's part contributes greatly to improved flow for the reader.

After this initial goal-setting task, the work was organised in three cycles, each starting with some strategy-development activity and culminating in a writing assignment.

### 6.2 Strategy development

#### 6.2.1 Exploiting online resources

To start the first cycle, I asked the students to search the internet for resources which addressed the issues which they had decided to focus on. They each posted a message to a discussion forum in Tabula, recommending or "sponsoring" a particular resource. The message was to include the URL, together with information on the issues or topics addressed and the type of material provided, whether interactive tasks, tasks with answer keys or model answers, explanation of the issues, and/or examples of usage.

Altogether, the students posted information on 24 different resources. Most were websites maintained by universities or other educational organisations. A few e-books were mentioned, and one student recommended a traditional print book available in the TAMK library. The majority of the materials mentioned were large-scale resources covering many different language issues, but in the accompanying messages half of the students (n =12) referred to advice and activities related to writing in English. Several of the resources specifically targeted writers of scientific or academic English. Of the other messages, six drew attention to grammar issues, five to vocabulary development and one to listening practice.

The students' second task was to explore the resources described in the previous task, looking specifically for materials which addressed any of the learning targets which they had set for themselves. They were asked to post a message to a new discussion forum, documenting which materials they had used, which activities they had tried and how useful they had found them. Before they set about this work, however, I raised the question of which kinds of practice activities can promote learning most effectively. Interactive tasks providing instant, automated feedback are popular with students because of their game-like qualities. But many tasks in this category are of the "click-on-the-correct-option" variety, which encourages guesswork rather than well considered decision-making. Referring to research which supports the view that writing by hand promotes learning better

than clicking (e.g. Mangen and Velay 2010), I strongly recommended that the students apply critical judgement to the choice of practice tasks and favour activities which involve a deeper level of mental processing.

This time, only seventeen of the students posted to the discussion forum. In more than one message, students commented negatively on activities which required them to write their answers on paper before comparing their own versions with model answers. Clearly, the pep-talk on learning theory did not influence everybody's choices. Most of the posts were rather short, and revealed that the writers had selected tasks well within their current capability. Nevertheless, some students had sought out tasks which focused on the language issues they had chosen to develop and which presented a suitable level of challenge. Also, a few of the posts were genuinely informative for classmates, and showed some thought and insight. Two examples, commenting on different materials, may suffice:

1. I've used the resource which Max has posted already for some time to learn Finnish. it is pretty good, but the disadvantage is that it would be more helpful if there was a context or sentences with the new words. It makes learning of the new words much easier than trying to just memorize words separately.
2. This [website] caught my eye. I thought it would be interesting to have a look at methods to develop vocabulary, as these techniques can probably also be used for languages other than English. The website recommends using a notebook to record your vocabulary and explains different methods of using it. There are some exercises but to me they feel more like examples. However, it is made clear that you have to think about the meanings behind and linkages between words in order to get a full grasp on language.

#### 6.2.2 Vocabulary expansion

While the students were engaged with the "exploring resources" task, I added to the Tabula environment a topic box dedicated to vocabulary development, since a large majority of the course participants had mentioned this as one of their learning targets. In this topic box, I posted a link to <http://www.businessdictionary.com/>, a resource that, among other interesting features, can be searched and browsed by subject, including "environment and pollution control" and "industries, manufacturing, & technology". These and many other field-specific sections show alphabetical lists of words and special terms, where each listed item forms a link to a definition of the item concerned. I also copied to the same box the online resources for vocabulary development which students had recommended in the earlier task, together with the "sponsoring" students' comments. Finally, I added a "terminology wiki".

A wiki is an online work-in-progress to which any member of the online community can contribute; in this case, all students enrolled in the Tabula course environment have contributor rights. The terminology wiki is in the form of a table, with columns for the target word or expression, synonyms, a definition, a sample of language where the term is used in a natural context, and an extra column for notes, such as students' own-language equivalents, antonyms, or references to other items; the "autotroph (noun)" item, for example, has a note which reads "see also heterotroph". This vocabulary development box was introduced to the students in the next session, and some minutes were spent experimenting with the "edit" and "view" buttons of the wiki, which is all the technical knowledge that contributors require. I also explained that the aim of contributing to the wiki is not only to learn the meanings of completely new items, but to learn to *use* terminology that is already familiar on some level, in other words, to expand one's store of *active* vocabulary. At the end of the course, the resource can be copied and pasted into a personal file by any students who wish to continue developing their vocabulary autonomously.

#### 6.2.3 Creating language development tasks on a do-it-yourself basis

To begin the second work cycle, I introduced the strategy of using a reading text for independent language study. In class, the students read a two-page text, then worked through a set of four language tasks which I had devised based on the text. The first task covered proof-reading for definite and

indefinite articles; the second required the students to reunite topic sentences with their original paragraphs. In both these cases the original text provided a ready-made answer key. The third task dealt with cohesion; one paragraph of the reading text was analysed and annotated as a model, and another paragraph was deconstructed into separate, simple sentences for the students to rebuild into a cohesive text. The aim was not to recreate the original paragraph from memory, but for the students to compare their own rewritten version with the original, and think about how effectively cohesive their version was. The final task was to identify and collect models of tentative and speculative language from the reading text, with a view to using such expressions in a future report. Some examples from the text were given, to clarify the idea. This task is shown as appendix ii. No clear “answer key” was available for this task, so the students compared among themselves the language samples which they had identified as tentative or speculative, and discussed any differences of opinion.

To follow up this work, the students were asked to create new language development tasks, using or freely adapting any of the models experimented with in class. The instruction provided was, “*Decide what aspect of English you want to work on and devise a task that you think will help. Adapt to the purpose any of the task types practised in class. Use any text that you think provides useful language models. PLEASE PROVIDE AN ANSWER KEY.*” Once again, the students posted their tasks to a dedicated discussion forum in Tabula.

A couple of students posted tasks copied directly from online resources, but out of the seventeen posts to the forum, fifteen included original activities, as envisaged in the task description. Of the topics addressed in the tasks, the most popular was cohesion (four original tasks plus one copied), followed by usage of definite and indefinite articles (three tasks), usage of commas (two tasks), and paragraphing issues (two tasks). Other topics focused on paraphrasing, common mistakes in student writing, vocabulary (gap-filling) and *-ed* endings of verbs, each represented by one task. Some came with a motivational message, for example:

1. The following phrases each contain one or more grammatical/stylistic mistakes I have heard or seen my fellow students make on occasion (and almost certainly have made myself). The original phrases come from BBC News, which I'm assuming is a linguistically reliable source. Using hi-tech witchcraft, I have hidden the original phrase (highlight to reveal), plus a hint, i.e. how many mistakes each phrase contains. Happy solving!
2. The following paragraphs are missing commas (..or are they?). Help me find the mistakes! The answers (copy-pasted from the original texts) and links to the original articles are found in the Word-document attached to this post. No peeking!!

The titles of all the posts were clear and informative; a couple of them were particularly catchy or intriguing: “*Be a Comma Detective*”; “*Improve your cohesion with Nabokov*”.

Later in the course, I have planned to allocate time for the students to experiment with and comment on each other's tasks, in order to establish peer collaboration as another useful strategy for autonomous language development.

#### 6.2.4 Review of autonomous language development strategies

The final cycle of work began with a review in class of the autonomous language development strategies which had been introduced and practised during the course so far. After that, students were invited to mention additional strategies which they use themselves. The full list is given below:

Strategies introduced during the course:

1. Seeking out and using suitable online resources for explanation and practice of selected language issues. “Suitable” means targeting the right issue at an appropriate level of challenge.
2. Selecting a section of text while reading, and examining particular aspects of its language, e.g. cohesive devices (including articles), use and form of passive constructions, relative clauses and their contracted versions etc.

3. Devising suitable (defined as in item 1 above) language tasks for oneself (and others) based on a text one is reading for another purpose.
4. Reading classmates' texts and identifying causes of poor readability e.g. unhelpful ordering of information, missing or irrelevant information, grammatical errors, odd word choices etc.
5. Collecting new words and expressions in a notebook or some other format (e.g. wiki!), together with synonyms, definitions and samples of language in which they are used in context.
6. Putting yourself in the readers' place: bearing in mind what the reader is likely to know already, and might want to learn by reading your text.

Additional ideas from students:

7. Leaving one's text to "rest" for a while e.g. overnight before proof-reading.
8. Reading one's text aloud to help spot errors when proof-reading.
9. Seeking out opportunities to communicate with native speakers, partly in order to learn idiomatic language from them, but partly for the fun of spotting grammatical "irregularities" in their speech and/or writing.
10. Repeating new words aloud until they stick in the memory.

### 6.3 Writing tasks

Each cycle of work finished with a writing task, so that the students could incorporate their latest learning into a complete text.

#### 6.3.1 The TED talk task

The writing task for cycle one involved taking notes from a lecture, then writing them up into a fully developed, informative text. I chose this format because colleagues who teach field-specific subjects have mentioned that students are not very systematic about note-taking in class. Furthermore, a visiting professor from Japan would be giving a lecture to the students later in the course, so the current task was also intended as preparation for that occasion.

For the current activity I selected two lectures from the splendid "TED talks" website (<https://new.ted.com/talks>), which provides free access to short talks on every possible topic, given by experts in each particular field. The students were asked to write up the notes carefully into a readable and informative text, concentrating on the aspects of English that they wanted to improve. Half of the class listened to, took notes on and wrote up one lecture, and the other half did the same with a different lecture. Two discussion forums were opened in Tabula, one for each lecture; the students posted their own text in the relevant forum.

After that, the students read the texts about the lecture which they had not heard themselves and posted encouraging feedback. The rationale for this part of the task was to provide the writers with readers genuinely more ignorant than themselves on the topic concerned. This is not a common situation for student writers. Normally, they write for teachers who, even before reading, have a clear idea of the information that the students' texts should include. The purpose in writing, therefore, is hardly ever to inform the reader. This fact tends to distort the way in which students write. For example, students often skimp on the introduction to their text, reasoning that the context has already been established in the task description created by the teacher. Also, content is commonly selected and organised in order to demonstrate what the writer knows, not what the reader might want to know. And if the writer does not have time to proof-read - never mind - the teacher will be able to understand it anyway. Obviously, beyond the educational environment a completely different set of norms apply, so teachers have to arrange practice tasks that approximate real-world requirements.

Most of the comments posted by classmates were encouraging, relevant, and, I believe, even more motivating than similar comments would have been if made by a teacher. For example:

1. You've managed to get into details as well as keeping the big picture clear and reasonable. In my opinion your text was very easy and pleasant to read. Without hearing the lecture myself, I think anybody would get the idea what the lecture was all about and learn the essential information from

your summary. Although sometimes in the text I was not sure which thoughts were yours and which lecturer's, the message is clear and loud, so to say. Paragraphs have been done properly.

2. Your notes are short but contain the most important points of the lecture. You made a kind of logical chain leading to the food crisis, I liked it. Short, clear and all about the major things.

I, too, provided feedback on the texts which were submitted by the set deadline. I assigned no grades (proscribed by Deci and Ryan (1985) as “controlling feedback”), and little outright correction, drawing students’ attention to problem areas instead with question marks in the margin, underlining of oddly worded bits of text and comments such as “*Check out the places marked. Can you see the problem now?*”; “*Review the rules for using articles and think how to change your text in the places marked.*”

Writers thus benefited from two sets of feedback. But learning was potentially enhanced for the peer readers, too, as they compared the information value of different texts on the same topic, noticed possible problems with readability, identified the sources and considered how the problem could be eliminated.

#### 6.3.2 Article based on a guest lecture

To complete the second work cycle, the students were to attend the guest lecture mentioned above, given by a professor from Hokkaidu University in Japan, to take notes, write them up, and post them to Tabula. For students who were not able to attend the lecture, alternative topics were agreed on by negotiation. This time, I was the target reader, and genuinely less knowledgeable than the students. The task description included the following guidance:

I will not be at the lecture and will therefore know only what I read in your texts. So please make your text informative and readable. That means:

- including sufficient information.
- presenting the information in a logical order.
- organising the material in well-formed paragraphs.
- showing how the ideas are related to each other (i.e. using cohesive devices).
- making each sentence as accurate as possible regarding grammar, word use and spelling, and punctuation.

One week after the set deadline, as cycle three was scheduled to begin, only ten texts had been submitted.

#### 6.3.2 Writing a blog-post

The main task for cycle three is for each of the students to write a blog-post for publication on a blog run by the environmental engineering students’ association, G.L.O.B.E., hosted on the TAMK website. The task description reads: “*Your task is to write an article for publication on the GLOBE blog. The aim is to inform and enlighten readers about a specific environmental issue where you have some special knowledge that the general public lacks. Assume that your readers lack scientific knowledge but are intelligent people with an interest in the world around them.*” Writing or contributing to an environment-related blog is in itself a process which the students may conceivably wish to continue in the future, but the publication format is not the main issue here. The essential point is that the writing context requires the students to address readers less informed than themselves, and persuade them that the topic in question is interesting and important. Writing to inform and influence readers is thus the target skill.

In preparation, the students worked in groups to explore websites which provide advice for potential blog-writers, selected up to ten guidelines which they approved of, and posted these sets of advice to a forum in Tabula. I later collated all the proposed guidelines into a set of ten, starting with “Choose a topic you are passionate about”. At the time of writing, this work is in progress. Once topics have been selected and researched, and first drafts written, the students will work in pairs, giving feedback on the information value of each other’s texts. A second peer review is planned, focusing on

readability. The final task will be for students to read and comment on each other's published posts and respond to comments on their own post.

## 7. REVIEW OF ROLES

In the autonomous language learning model, it is the learner who "independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation" (Thanasoulas 2000, p.2). In the standard or traditional approach, all of these functions except actually carrying out the tasks belong to the teacher's role; no role is envisaged for the peer group. To what extent have roles changed in the advanced English course presented in this article?

### *7.1 Choosing aims and purposes and setting goals*

Where goal-setting is concerned, the overall objective for this course - to assist students to develop independent strategies for improving their skills in writing formal English - was my choice, subject to the curriculum framework specified for the environmental engineering degree programme at Tampere University of Applied Sciences. I set the goal without consulting the students on whether they care about autonomy or not. I see it as an essential part of the teacher's role to convince possibly sceptical students of the desirability of learning to learn, or, as Godwin-Jones puts it: "helping the student develop the skills and mindset that can lead to successful self-guided language study" (2011 p. 4). On the operational level, however, the students were given a free hand; they were asked to identify aspects of their own English usage which they wished to develop, and to set individual learning goals.

### *7.2 Choosing materials methods and tasks*

In order to help the students achieve their individual goals, my role as the course teacher has been to advise on strategy development rather than to explain aspects of the English language itself. So I have advised the students to seek out explanations and practice opportunities online, demonstrated how they might devise personalised tasks to address their own learning needs, and introduced some learning theory to guide students towards effective learning habits. The choice of study materials and practice activities has thus been devolved to the students to a large extent. However, for strategic reasons, the writing tasks have been set by me. For example, the writing task based on the TED talks could have allowed the students a free choice of input. But in order to enable the students to compare the information value of different texts, it was necessary that all the texts be on the same topic. For the blog-post task, the students are free to select the topic.

The approach adopted in this course also assigns a role to peer learners, working one-to-one, in small groups, and at the whole-class level. For example, the collection of online language learning resources has been put together from contributions by practically every student in the class. Small-group discussions in class have produced the list of learning strategies, and the composite set of features of good blog-posts. As readers of classmate's work, students have the chance to identify strengths and weaknesses, and feed these observations back into their own writing. There is also a role for learning collaboration in some of the tasks that students can create for themselves. For example, in the task described in section 6.2, students compared and discussed their understanding of *tentative and speculative language*. Another example might be for a pair or small group of learners to write individual summaries or paraphrases of an agreed text, then compare and discuss the results.

### *7.3 Exercising choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks*

The organisation of the learning activities remains rather firmly in the teacher's hands. The students have a certain amount of freedom to decide where and when to do the various tasks, but the teacher has to plan the work overall and set deadlines so that everything can be completed by the end of the course. I do not see this as a negative issue; the students are preparing themselves for working life, where managing one's time, meeting deadlines and being accountable are basic prerequisites for employment.

#### 7.4 Choosing criteria for evaluation

In the future, it might be worthwhile asking students to specify the issues on which they would like to receive feedback in each of their writing tasks. I have not done this on this course. The students have simply been asked to make their texts as informative and readable as possible, and these concepts have been further defined for the students' guidance. Those who have submitted assignments by agreed deadlines have received feedback on their writing in a form intended to guide their individual learning process.

The students have also been asked to provide feedback on other students' work, thus taking on a role normally reserved for the teacher alone. In the final writing task, the blog-post, I envisage a more significant role for peer-to-peer feedback. In both teacher and peer feedback, the focus has been on providing the *informational* kind, which research suggests is associated with autonomous learning. However, since the course is part of an officially recognised degree programme, I shall also be required to provide *controlling* feedback at the end of the course, in the form of final grades. These will take into consideration the students' level of activity in practising language development strategies, in addition to their demonstrated competence in writing.

### 8. ASSESSMENT OF OUTCOMES

At the time of writing, the course which is the focus of this article is still in progress, so it is a little early to evaluate outcomes. Nevertheless, a study requires a conclusion, however tentative. I therefore conducted a small survey halfway through the course, in order to monitor the current state of affairs. Twenty of the twenty-five students enrolled on the course participated in the survey. In one of the survey items, the respondents were asked to assess how actively they use strategies for developing their written English by giving themselves a number between 0 (not at all) and 5 (very actively). The most common response was number 3 (selected by 8 students), closely followed by 4 (selected by 7 students). The other five students selected 2 (4 students) or 1 (1 student). Thus, if strategy use can be equated with autonomous learning behaviour, only a third of the students consider themselves more than moderately autonomous where developing their written English is concerned.

The other items in the survey were:

1. I am interested in doing post-graduate studies in English.
2. My current level of proficiency in English is sufficient for my short / mid-term needs, including graduation from TAMK.
3. After graduation, I hope to find a job where I can use English professionally.
4. My current level of proficiency in English is sufficient for all my foreseeable needs.
5. I have to prioritise field-specific subject areas over English.
6. I find it interesting to develop my skills in writing English.
7. **(For NON-Finns)** I need to focus on developing my Finnish skills.

Items 1 and 3 related to instrumental motivation, item 6 to intrinsic motivation. Items 2 and 5 looked at the students' perceived need to develop their English skills, while 4 and 7 looked at their learning priorities. For each statement, the respondents were asked to assign a number between 5 and 0, where 5 meant, "This describes me very well" and 0 meant, "This does not apply to me at all".

The seven students who identified themselves as rather active strategy users (level 4), were distinguishable from the moderate and less active strategy users (levels 3-1) in two ways. Firstly they were more motivated than the others, both instrumentally and intrinsically.

I am interested in doing post-graduate studies in English. Six selected 5; one selected 4.

After graduation, I hope to find a job where I can use English professionally. Six selected 5; one selected 4.

I find it interesting to develop my skills in writing English. Two selected 5; five selected 4.

Secondly, all seven consider their current level of English to be adequate for their immediate and/or long-term needs.

My current level of proficiency in English is sufficient for my short / mid-term needs, including graduation from TAMK. Four selected 5; three selected 4.

My current level of proficiency in English is sufficient for all my foreseeable needs. Two selected 5; three selected 4; two selected 3.

So their active learning behaviour is not driven by a perceived lack of proficiency. We might characterise these students as motivated and confident, but not complacent.

Items 5 and 7, on priority setting, did not reveal any differences between more and less active users of language strategies. The students who described themselves as moderate or less active strategy users selected a wider range of numbers on all the survey items.

Obviously, a sample of twenty students is too tiny to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn. What we can say for sure is that these students are motivated by different things, prioritise different things and vary in their attitudes to learning English. But as course teachers, we have to take all our students' variations into consideration. So how are the benefits of autonomous learning to be successfully promoted to heterogeneous groups? The answers are as varied as the students themselves. Instrumentally motivated students can be reminded that developing their English autonomously is the key to their long-term success. Every language development strategy introduced needs to maintain the interest of the intrinsically motivated, while engaging the interest of a few of the others. Students inclined to prioritise field-specific studies over English need to know that through creative use of strategies they can learn about their special field and develop their English at the same time. The non-Finns who are giving top priority to learning Finnish need to be aware that many learning strategies are not language-specific; strategies for developing English skills can also be applied to learning other languages, too.

Some of our students will already be active strategy users before we ever meet them, and may continue to make progress towards greater autonomy under our guidance. But undoubtedly, giving students the opportunity to become more autonomous learners does not mean that they will all avail themselves of the opportunity, at least during the process of a single course. Whether they are autonomous learners or not, all our students are autonomous *individuals*, and will make choices in keeping with their current priorities. But circumstances change, and students without strong motivation to develop their English now may yet find the motivation later in their lives, when autonomous learning is their only option. As teachers, we are accustomed to taking a long-term view, doing what we can here and now to prepare students for currently unforeseeable future needs.

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## APPENDIX i

*Aspects of writing in English mentioned by students as targets for development*

| Issue to be targeted                 | Number of mentions |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>GRAMMAR</b>                       |                    |
| Passive voice                        | 4                  |
| Use of articles                      | 5                  |
| Relative clauses: “that” / “which”   | 1                  |
| Syntax: simple and complex sentences | 5                  |
| <b>PUNCTUATION</b>                   |                    |
| Use of genitive “s”                  | 1                  |
| Using commas                         | 14                 |
| <b>WRITING ISSUES</b>                |                    |
| Improving flow                       | 4                  |
| Cohesion                             | 5                  |
| Paraphrasing                         | 9                  |
| Synthesising                         | 5                  |
| Mind-mapping                         | 1                  |
| <b>VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT</b>        |                    |
| Scientific and technical terminology | 22                 |
| Spelling                             | 1                  |
| <b>OTHER ISSUES</b>                  |                    |
| Using mindmaps                       | 1                  |
| Working in a timely manner           | 1                  |

## APPENDIX ii

### *Do-it-yourself English language development tasks*

#### **Finding useful language for particular purposes**

Imagine: you are planning the THEORY and DISCUSSION sections of a report. In your text, you need to present scientific findings (other people's findings in the theory part, your own in the discussion) whose implications are not entirely clear. In other words, you need language for SPECULATING and expressing TENTATIVE (i.e. possible but uncertain) CONCLUSIONS. **Search the text** for models of this type of language. **Record complete sentences** so that you can see how words have to be combined according to the rules of syntax.

#### Some examples of tentative and speculative language

1. Two reports attempting to summarise the world's rather patchy knowledge about what is going on have recently been published. [...] Together, the documents suggest this is an issue that needs to be taken seriously, though worryingly little is known about it.
10. As the map above shows, [low omega values] could be a problem by 2100. Low omega values are spreading from the poles (whose colder waters dissolve carbon dioxide more easily) towards the tropics. The Monterey report suggests that the rate of erosion of reefs could outpace reef building by the middle of the century, and that all reef formation will cease by the end of it.

Now search the paragraphs below for more examples.

12. Not everything suffers from more dissolved CO<sub>2</sub>, though. The Monterey report cites studies which support the idea that algae, cyanobacteria and sea grasses will indeed benefit. One investigation also suggests acidification may help cyanobacteria fix nitrogen and turn it into protein. Since a lack of accessible nitrogen keeps large areas of the ocean relatively sterile, this, too could be good for productivity.
13. The Monaco report attempts to identify fisheries that will be particularly affected by these changes. [...] The principal threat [...] is to planktonic larvae that fish eat. Oyster and clam beds around the world are also likely to be affected—again, the larvae of these animals are at risk. The report does not, however, investigate the possibility of increases in algal plankton raising the oceans' overall productivity.
14. 56m years ago, [at] the boundary between the Palaeocene and Eocene geological epochs, carbon-dioxide levels rose sharply, the climate suddenly warmed (by about 6°C) and the seas became a lot more acidic. Many marine species [...] became extinct in mere centuries, and some students of the transition think the increased acidity was more to blame for this than the rise in temperature...
15. Oceanic acidity levels appear now to be rising ten times as fast as they did at the end of the Palaeocene. Some Earth scientists think the planet is entering, as it did 56m years ago, a new epoch—the Anthropocene. Though the end of the Palaeocene was an extreme example, it is characteristic of such transitions for the pattern of life to change quickly. Which species will suffer and which will benefit in this particular transition remains to be seen.

Save your language samples for future use.