

## Developing an Independent Learning Component for an EFL Course

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For some time I have known that developing students' independent learning capabilities is highly desired in a language program. However, when I decided to implement an independent learning component in one of my courses recently, I learned the hard way that it is not enough to simply tell students that they should study on their own. Fortunately, I had greater success with my second attempt. My experience may be helpful to others who wish to implement an independent learning component in their ESL or EFL courses.

These steps summarize the process I followed in my first attempt to incorporate independent language learning in my tertiary level English and Communication course.

1. I asked my students to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses in their English language learning and identify the skill area(s) they wanted to improve.
2. I asked them to write down what they wanted to achieve by the end of the semester using a simple learner contract.
3. I gave students a list of online resources for studying English.
4. I asked them to record their learning activities in a learner log.
5. I collected two entries from their learner logs at the end of the term.

At the end of the semester, however, I found that students did not show any improvement in their English learning. More important, some students wrote in their reflections on the experience that they lacked the skills to learn independently and did not even know how to begin a self study routine. This feedback helped me rethink my assumptions and improve my implementation in my second attempt.

Despite dismal results in the first time, I tried implementing an independent language learning component in the course again in the next semester. Again, I asked them to identify the areas in English that they wanted to improve, set some goals for the semester, and record them in a learner contract similar to the one in Appendix 1. Again, I gave students a list of websites for self study. However, I also made a number of important changes in preparing for and implementing the self study component the second time around. These changes include the following:

1. I began by meeting my students individually or in small groups to explain the reasons for and process of self study.
2. Both the students and I signed their contract signifying our pledge to work together to achieve their goals.
3. Instead of just asking the students to explore the websites by themselves, I made an effort to match my website suggestions to the students based on their needs, levels, learning styles, and the goals that they had set for themselves.
4. I expanded my suggestions for study beyond websites to include more authentic sources of input such as movies, TV programmes such as *Friends*, and magazines such as *EZ Talk*. (A subset of the websites that I recommend is in Appendix 2)
5. Responding to the feedback I had received in the first semester regarding the need for more training and guidance, I gave students who needed it some training. For example, in one lesson, I taught how typical newspaper stories are organized with the main points of the story packed into the first few sentences and subsequent paragraphs used to elaborate on those points. This kind of instruction helps students understand where they need to focus their attention in reading for gist in a news article.

6. As before, I asked students to keep a log of their work. However, this time, I asked them to record more specific information and to submit the log more frequently. They recorded the activities they did, resources they used, what they had learned (for example, words, expressions, or grammatical patterns), and, if relevant, what difficulties they encountered. When I checked their logs, I gave some positive feedback to let them know what they had done well but I also made suggestions about areas that they could still improve.
7. At the end of the semester, each student selected several samples of their work to submit as a small portfolio. These work samples provided documentation of their learning and comprised 20 percent of the course grade.

In evaluating the project at the end of the second semester, I found that students not only improved significantly but also expressed positive feelings towards their experience with independent language learning. Many indicated that they had become more confident about learning English on their own. Additional study would be necessary to determine precisely which factors were most significant, but the combination of careful, student-centred planning, a wide range of options, continuous feedback, and student accountability seem to have led to a successful outcome in this independent learning program.

#### About the Author

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang is a teaching fellow at the Department of English, The Hong Kong Institute of Education. She obtained her BEd, MEd, and MA in Applied Linguistics at The University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include second language teaching and learning and gender and language.

Appendix 1

## Learner Contract

I \_\_\_\_\_ (your name) have identified my weakness in \_\_\_\_\_ and have set the following goals to help improve my English:

Goal 1: To \_\_\_\_\_

To achieve this goal, I will \_\_\_\_\_ this semester.

Goal 2: \_\_\_\_\_

To achieve this goal, I will \_\_\_\_\_ this semester.

Goal 3: \_\_\_\_\_

To achieve this goal, I will \_\_\_\_\_ this semester.

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Student's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Agreed to on: \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

## Appendix 2

### Websites for English Language Learning

AudioEnglish.net <http://www.audioenglish.net/>

A collection of English conversations illustrating both practical and specific purpose contexts including Travel English, Telephone English, Banking English, and Accounting English; includes transcripts and audio files from beginner to upper intermediate levels.

Better@English <http://www.betteratenglish.com/>

Intended to enhance listening skills with podcast recordings, transcripts, and lessons on topics from telling time to perfectionism and business English with special focus on idioms, slang, and usage.

BBC Learning English <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>

A rich and versatile website with resources addressing all needs from business English to podcasts of radio stations for learners of different ages.

Conversations for ESL Students <http://www.rong-chang.com/book/>

An online conversation book for ESL learners at the intermediate level.

EnglishClub.com <http://www.englishclub.com/>

A portal to a host of other list of resources, lessons, and networks for English language learners and teachers all over the world. It has links for individual skills like pronunciation and reading as well as projects and games that can be used in a variety of ways.

English Page <http://www.englishpage.com/prepositions/phrasaldictionary.html>

Online English lessons and resources for students and teachers including an online phrasal verb dictionary, for example.

English Pronunciation <http://international.ouc.bc.ca/pronunciation/>

Free online English pronunciation lessons with videos and a variety of exercises.

ESLgold.net

<http://www.eslgold.com/>

A virtual library of resources for both teachers and learners of English on all levels, organized by skill or topic such as business English; has links to information in 16 languages.

Game Zone

<http://www.english-online.org.uk/games/gamezone2.htm>

A website with online English language games for learners of all levels.

Interesting Things for ESL Students

<http://www.manythings.org/>

A free website for ESL and EFL students with word games, puzzles, MP3 reading and listening texts, and other computer-assisted language learning activities.

Internet TESL Journal

<http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Reading/>

Primarily a teacher resource site but with links for students as well; includes puzzles, riddles, and a wonderful collection of questions to help with conversations on dozens of topics; also includes bilingual quizzes in dozens of languages.

Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab

<http://esl-lab.com/>

A three-level collection of short authentic-like audio files on a wide range of everyday topics. Each one has pre, during, and post listening tasks. At the lowest level, students can read the transcript while they listen.

ReadingMatrix.com

<http://www.readingmatrix.com/directory/pages/>

A database with nearly 150 links to interactive online reading activities such as analysing text, proofreading, and stories for learners of all levels.