

Implementing learner training from a teacher's perspective

Sally Logan and Nick Moore

Introduction

A syllabus integrating self-access learning into language teaching depends on teacher knowledge and learner training. Learners need assistance to learn autonomously and teachers play a key role in providing this (Benson 2001, Gardner and Miller 1999, Sinclair, McGrath and Lamb 2000). A professional development program was designed and implemented at a private language school to facilitate the transition from a school with a token learning centre to one with timetabled learning centre hours and a syllabus that promoted independent learning. The professional development program focused on providing teachers with ideas, strategies and resources to enable them to encourage learner autonomy.

This paper reports on teacher perceptions of one stage of the professional development program, a series of six lessons focused on learner training. Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire and interviews. Findings showed that teachers believe learner training is important but are not necessarily able to operationalise these beliefs in their classroom practice. The study also indicated how the teachers used the lessons and how useful they perceived the lessons were for themselves and their learners.

Background

Learner training is a key way for teachers to help learners learn autonomously. It includes two important areas. These are raising learner awareness of how languages are learned and providing them with the skills they need to do it. Tudor (1996: 37) describes it as *the process by which learners are helped to deepen their understanding of the nature of language learning and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to pursue their learning goals in an informal and self-directed manner.*

In order for learner training to be successful, Dickinson (1988) says it should include three main components. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is training in the processes and strategies for language learning. This includes such things as how to read a text, how to record vocabulary and how to guess the meaning of a phrase. The next component involves raising learner awareness of how the target language operates and in doing so includes metalanguage to describe the target language. One of the advantages of this is that learners are better able to use reference books such as grammar books and dictionaries. The final component, suggested by Dickinson, involves focusing on the theory of second language acquisition. If learners have some awareness of how languages are learned, this may influence their own practices in learning.

The time a learner spends outside the classroom is far greater than the time spent in it. Therefore, it makes sense that knowing how to learn independently will help a learner progress. Benson (2001: 146) also suggests that *there is good evidence that learner development programs can be effective in improving language learning performance.* Learner training plays an important role in encouraging learners to learn independently. It cannot be assumed that learners know how to learn. Holec (1979: 27) provided an early signal of this: *few adults are capable of assuming responsibility for their learning ... for the simple reason that they have never had the occasion to use this ability.* Even though education may have changed in the last 20 years, it still cannot be assumed that learners know how to learn independently. As Tudor (1996: 34) states, *the knowledge and personal qualities that learner involvement requires cannot be taken for granted and need to be developed over time.*

It seems apparent then that learner training is important and needs to be taught. Literature available on how to implement such training focuses on two main techniques. The first is teaching it explicitly and the second is allowing learners time to reflect in some way. This may be reflection on the learning process, the strategies used or their beliefs about learning. Benson (2001) says a combination of explicit teaching and reflection could be more effective. Tudor (1996) focuses on making reasons for strategies

explicit in order for learners to see their relevance. He supports this by talking about Wenden's (1986) distinction between *informed training* and *blind training*. Blind training is when learners are taught strategies but do not know why these are useful. Informed training involves explicitly telling learners when they are being taught strategies, as well as why and when these strategies are used. This focus on explicit teaching is currently coming through in published material available to teachers (e.g. Scharle and Szabo 2000, Gardner and Miller 1999). Learner training should not be an isolated occurrence in a language lesson and McDonough (1999) claims it is more effective when incorporated into teachers' normal classroom behaviour.

It is generally agreed that teachers play a key role in helping learners to learn autonomously (Benson 2001, Gardner and Miller 1999, Sinclair, McGrath and Lamb 2000). Therefore, the training of teachers in how to implement learner training in their classrooms is important. However, there appears to be little pre-service training available in this area. For example, the Cambridge CELTA syllabus (http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teaching/celta/celta8_251103.pdf - retrieved 03/03/2004) does not contain a focus on learner training, although individual training centres can include a focus in their courses, if they choose to. This is the qualification that the majority of teachers in private language schools in New Zealand have and indeed the qualification that the vast majority of the teachers involved in this study held. How or if learner training is used in the classroom tends to be a decision made by the individual teacher. Although they may think learner training is important they are not necessarily able to implement this in the classroom. This idea is supported by Little (1995) who questions teacher commitment to operationalise beliefs. McGrath (2000) says there is a need to think about the initial training and continual support for teachers in this area. He suggests this is an area that has been neglected in recent discussions.

The lessons that form the basis of this study aimed to provide teachers with the initial training they needed in order to encourage their learners to learn independently. This study focuses on teachers' impression of those lessons. For example, how useful they thought the lessons were for themselves and their learners.

Context

The study took place in a private language school in New Zealand. The school has international students from thirteen different countries including China, Korea, Brazil, Switzerland, Japan and Russia. Courses offered at the school are mostly General English but there are a number of EAP, Business, and exam courses (Cambridge/ IELTS/TOEFL/TOEIC). The school had undergone a big change in its timetable between 2002 and 2003. In 2002, it had a token Learning Centre (LC) and 23 hours of class time per week. Teachers could take their classes to the LC by booking a 1.5-hour slot. It was generally seen as an easy option for teachers and was sometimes used as a time -filler.

At the beginning of 2004, a new LC was opened and the school aimed to integrate individual language learning into the syllabus. Students were timetabled for two 1.5-hour slots per week. The LC was open outside these times for extra study. All teachers were rostered into the LC for 1.5 hours a week and staffed the extra study time.

For the teachers this was a big change and they were required to do things they had not been expected to do before. For example, they were expected to facilitate learning in the LC, link the classroom and the LC and train learners to learn outside the classroom and use the LC effectively. In order to help them with this change, a professional development series was developed with the following four workshops:

Workshop 1 – Reflection

What is “autonomy”?

How autonomous can a learner be?

What is the teacher's role (relating this to differences in educational cultures)?

Learner training at different proficiency levels

Workshop 2 – Goal-setting and evaluation

Why is Goal-setting important in an independent learning context?

Teachers plan classes at different levels using the goal-setting lessons as a starting point.

Workshop 3 – Developing learning strategies

Teachers discuss their own language learning strategies.

Focus on the level issue – different ways of developing learning strategies at different levels of English proficiency.

Workshop 4 – Troubleshooting and continuity

Reflecting on success and accounting for problems with learner training so far. The importance of reinforcing learner training ideas in the classroom

One part of this program was a series of 6 lessons that teachers could use with their classes to focus on different aspects of learner training. These lessons aimed to:

- provide teachers with the skills needed to train their learners to learn independently
- provide both teachers and students with the skills they needed to use the LC properly
- provide students with some basic skills to learn independently outside the classroom and in the LC

Referring back to Dickinson's (1988) criteria for what should be included in learner training, these lessons included explicit training in the processes, strategies and activities that can be used in language learning. They also aimed to raise learner awareness of the target language and a descriptive metalanguage. How much of the third component, aspects of the theory of language learning, that was imparted to learners during the lessons depended on the individual teacher and was generally limited to certain procedures e.g.: Why it is important to read a text quickly for gist before reading it for detail?

Each lesson had notes for the teachers and handouts that could be given to students. The lessons were designed so that the teacher would have enough information to be able to pick them up and use them in class without necessarily adapting them. However, teachers were able to adapt the lessons in any way they thought necessary to suit their learners. The lessons were designed to take no longer than 30 minutes and to go across levels with the understanding that teachers would need to explain vocabulary for lower levels. The first two lessons focused on goal setting, the next three on strategies for reading and listening, vocabulary and grammar and the final lesson focused on self-evaluation. The lessons were distributed to teachers intermittently over a two-month period.

Methodology

A total of 26 teachers were in the study, 4 in the pilot and 22 in the main study. At the time the majority of teachers were teaching General English classes, with a few teaching exam, EAP or business classes. All the teachers had some kind of English language teaching qualification, the most common being the Cambridge Certificate in English Teaching to Adults (CELTA). Three of the teachers had a secondary qualification of either the Cambridge Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) or a Masters in Applied Linguistics. The teachers' ESOL experience varied from 6 months to more than 2 years. Over half the teachers involved had more than two years experience teaching ESOL. In light of the transitory nature of ESOL teaching in the private language school sector, this made them a reasonably experienced group.

Data for this study was collected through a 12 item self-administered questionnaire and a follow-up interview. There was a stronger focus on qualitative methods of research because the study focused on the participants themselves and the truth as they saw it. The questionnaire was piloted with four teachers and the results were used. This was possible because there was little change between the piloted questionnaire and the final one.

Ten of the 22 participants were interviewed for 10 minutes each. These interviews were carried out over a one-month period starting immediately after the completion of the questionnaire. All the interviews were conducted by the same person. The chosen participants were selected on the basis of the answers given in the questionnaire in an attempt to get a balance between those who answered positively to the questions and those who gave less positive responses. The interviews focused on obtaining more detail about key items in the questionnaire, namely the importance of learner training and how useful the lessons were to the teachers and their students. The questionnaire results were collated and analysed and the interviews were transcribed and coded.

Results

The importance of learner training

The questionnaire showed that all teachers thought learner training was important to some degree, with the majority saying that it was very important. In interviews, teachers focused on their roles in helping students learn more autonomously. They saw themselves as having three distinct roles in learner training:

- 1 *Providers* teaching learners the skills they need to teach themselves
- 2 *Facilitators* enabling learners to talk about and experiment with learning strategies but not actually teaching them anything new
- 3 *Explainers* explaining the processes involved in learning in and out of class and the reasons behind strategies teachers taught in class

The role of provider was discussed more frequently than the others. Teachers did not identify themselves exclusively with one role but instead saw themselves in a combination of roles.

How the lessons were used

The questionnaire showed a relatively low level of uptake of the lessons, despite the fact that teachers said that they thought learner training was very important. Of the 26 teachers who replied to the questionnaire, the majority of the teachers did between 2 and 4 of the lessons. Four did none of the lessons and only two did all six.

In the interviews, teachers gave some explanations of why they had not done the lessons, although no one factor was singled out to account for the low level of uptake. One of the explanations was course book pressure. Teachers seemed to place more importance on completing the content of their course books than on implementing learner training, as Teacher F explained: *The book's quite dense and so to get through all the book I was just concentrating on that.*

Communication was another factor that contributed to the low level of uptake of the lessons. Five of the teachers did not know the lessons existed or said that they had forgotten about the lessons. A few teachers said they did not know about the lessons until a month after they had been made available to teaching staff.

Other reasons focused on students. The lessons were perceived as being too hard for the students' level. The teachers believed their students knew all about learning anyway or that the teachers thought the lessons would not be interesting for them.

In terms of how the lessons were used, only 1 out of 22 teachers did the lessons as they were presented in the lesson plan. Ten teachers did the lessons totally their own way and the other 11 mixed the ideas in the lesson plan with their own ideas.

Between them, the teachers used all the lessons, but some were more popular than others. The lesson on goal setting for skills was the most widely used, and also the first in the series. On the other hand, the language goal setting lesson was not used nearly as frequently. The lessons on reading and listening and vocabulary strategies were popular with teachers but the lesson on grammar strategies was used by few teachers. The final lesson in the series on self-evaluation was the least popular.

When deciding which lesson to use, the majority of teachers focused on student needs. The other most frequently given reason was that the lessons related to the content of normal classroom lessons.

The study concluded that all the teachers tried to integrate the ideas from the lessons to some degree with a fairly even spread between those who did so occasionally, sometimes and often.

Usefulness for teachers

Most of the teachers thought the lessons were useful for them as teachers in the classroom. Nearly all the teachers said the lessons provided them with new teaching skills associated with learner training. For some, the lessons provided something totally new, as Teacher F explains: *This is the first time that I've really been introduced to learner training.* For other teachers the focus on learner training extended what they already knew, as Teacher I explains: *Rather than just saying to the students 'find a*

meaningful way of recording the vocabulary, find something that works for you' it actually is just a little bit more focused, a bit more specific.

Some teachers talked about how the lessons helped explain why certain procedures used in class are useful for learning. Teacher B said: *g5129 They helped me see why we do things as we do. So I guess I was learning at the same time. An example of this is why gist reading activities are done before asking students to read for detail.*

Other teachers said that the lessons helped them see that ideas they had had about learner training were shared by others in the ELT profession. *Although I was previously aware of those things ... I think [the lessons] gave me a good indication of how important it was in the modern pedagogy* (Teacher I). Teacher B said: *They gave me confidence that some of the ideas that I'd had were on the right track.*

Three teachers, at the limits of the experience range, replied that the lessons were not useful for them as classroom teachers. One of these teachers was very experienced and said that she used all the learner training ideas with her classes anyway. The other two teachers were less experienced and admitted that they had not used the lessons effectively and for that reason had not benefited from them.

Usefulness for students

Overall teachers perceived the lessons as being useful for students but they had reservations. Many teachers ranked the lessons 3 out of 5, with 5 being the most useful, which although it is positive, is not very strong. Only one teacher thought the lessons were not useful, giving them 2 out of 5.

The following reasons why the lessons were not as useful as they could have been for students were given:

- 1 There was a problem with the teachers integrating the lessons properly into their classroom program. Some admitted having problems when they did the lessons. For example when planning, they had not considered how they needed to work these half hour lessons into their daily or weekly timetable in order to make them relevant and useful for their students. Teacher G explained: *I think on reflection I'd introduced it at an inappropriate time in the lesson or I hadn't melded it into the lesson in a way that maybe they could see that it made any sense.* Teacher E talks about the importance of building a meaningful context around the work on learner training: *I did the very first lesson with my class as it showed on the paper. And I found that my students really weren't interested just because it was out of context and at that time it wasn't relevant to them.*
- 2 Some teachers reported that not all students used the strategies from the lessons. Teachers talked about how you can *teach* students these strategies but in the end the choice is theirs as to whether or not they actually use them. *You can show them, but you can't make them do it. So even if I'm showing them how to do it. It doesn't mean they're actually doing it ... It's really a lot up to the individual* (Teacher F).
- 3 Learner language proficiency was another reason why the lessons were not perceived as being useful for the students. There was quite a strong feeling that the proficiency of the students was an important factor when deciding how much learner training was needed and how much the students would benefit from it. Several teachers thought that low level students (Elementary and Pre-intermediate) needed a lot of learner training but found it too difficult to understand. As Teacher F explains: *the reason I haven't done them with this class is they're too high for elementary.* This was an interesting comment because there was not any particularly difficult language in the lessons and they could often be used in combination with the material in the course book. This level issue was confirmed by other teachers who said that explaining the concepts behind learner training was difficult with lower level students.

On the other hand more proficient students (e.g.: Advanced) were perceived as not needing learner training because they had their own sufficient methods which had already got them to a high level. Teacher C said: *At lower levels they need a lot more taking by the hand and guiding. At advanced levels ... I don't think that is necessary so much ... they feel they already have sufficient awareness of what is available to make their own decisions and their own choices.*

Many teachers however said the lessons were very useful. Teachers reported witnessing students using the strategies inside class and when studying independently in the LC:

- Teacher J: *Well I did see them applying the sorts of things that were included.*
 Teacher H: *I've seen in their homework books when I mark their writing and they've recorded their vocab in a different way from before.*

Teachers also believed that the students gained more knowledge of the learning process, as a number of teachers explained:

- Teacher I: *I think they believed it [using the techniques from the lessons] improved their ability to do the task.*
 Teacher H: *Well a lot of the students I've just seen moving around and talking to students in the Learning Centre. The students now in the Learning Centre I think appear to be slightly more clued up about learning and stuff than they did at the beginning of the year and you can only assume that's because of the stuff we're trying to teach them.*
 Teacher A: *Yes I think their awareness has definitely been raised.*

Conclusion

Overall the lessons were considered useful for teachers and students. Teachers felt they were useful because they contextualised and justified their own beliefs and practices and in some cases extended their knowledge. Teachers felt learners benefited from the lessons because they appeared to use the strategies independently later.

However the lessons on the whole were not used widely. This low level of uptake suggests that these teachers were unwilling or unable to operationalise their beliefs about the importance of learner training. No single issue came out of the study, which explained the low level of uptake but communication in the way the lessons were presented and supported seemed to be a problem. The lessons were also not very useful to everyone who did them. In terms of the delivery of the lessons and how useful they were to the students, the study identified that teachers had problems fitting the learner training episodes into their normal classroom teaching. As well as this, the study uncovered issues about teacher beliefs and the proficiency of learners that need to be addressed.

Teacher G commented: *It [the lessons] was certainly a good beginning.* In order to build on these learner training lessons, for the continued professional development of these teachers, the study showed that it is important to explain the rationale behind the lessons more fully to teachers. In addition to this, the teachers need to be supported more in how to use the lessons. This is particularly important when teachers are planning their classes. Some will need guidance in how to introduce learner training at a time that is relevant to their students. These teachers also need guidance in adapting the ideas behind the lessons to suit their learners' language levels, motivation and interests.

On the issue of learner training and the proficiency level of the learners, these teachers need to be informed that learner training is not level dependent and can be implemented at different levels. Talking about learning and challenging learner beliefs and ways of studying are important at all levels. Tudor (1996) states that different strategies may need to be used at different stages in the learning process. What may be effective at intermediate or advanced levels may be inappropriate at beginner level and vice versa. There may be a case for saying that one lesson does not fit all levels.

Discussions in the literature on learner autonomy suggest teacher reflection on their own learning experiences and attitudes to learning is important. *Teachers need to be sensitized to their own beliefs and attitudes as a first step in becoming aware of any changes in their roles when working with their learners in self-access mode* (Gardner and Miller 1999: 43). Teacher H said in the interviews: *I think just talking about it with other teachers is quite useful and just more practice. And I mean it seems very silly but just being reminded to use those lessons and those ideas from those lessons it's really good.*

As a result of this study, an opportunity for reflection was provided in a series of workshops where teachers were given the opportunity to discuss their beliefs on learner autonomy and the use of learner training. These workshops provided teachers with the knowledge and skills they needed to encourage individual learning, as well as giving them an opportunity to reflect on and discuss what they think is useful and necessary for their learners.

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About the authors

Sally Logan has a Masters in Language Teaching and a Cambridge DELTA. She has been teaching for nine years in private language schools in Turkey and New Zealand. She is currently the Learning Centre Manager at Languages International. She is also a teacher trainer working on the Cambridge CELTA program at LITEC.

Email: sallyl@languages.ac.nz

Nick Moore has a Cambridge DELTA. He has been teaching for seven years in Turkey, the UK and New Zealand in language schools and tertiary institutions. He is currently a senior teacher at Languages International and supports the Learning Centre.

Email: nickm@languages.ac.nz

Appendix 1: Self-administered questionnaire

Implementing learner training from a teacher's perspective

Please answer the questions honestly

Name: _____

- 1 How many years TESOL experience have you had?
a) 0-6 months b) 6 months -1 year c) 1-2 years d) more than 2 years
 - 2 What is your highest TESOL qualification?
a Cambridge CTEFLA/CELTA or Trinity TESOL
b Cambridge DTEFLA/DELTA
c Masters in Applied Linguistics/Language Teaching
d Other (please specify) _____
 - 3 How important is learner training? *1 = not important 5 = very important*
1 2 3 4 5
 - 4 How many of the Learner Autonomy lessons did you use in some form ie: as the lesson plan or adapted? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6
 - 5 If you didn't do all the lessons, why not? Choose the **most important** reason/
a I didn't have time
b I didn't think my students would find them useful
c They were difficult for me to get my head round
d I heard from other teachers they didn't work very well
e They were too hard for my students' level
f I didn't know they existed/I forgot about them
g I didn't think my students would find them interesting
h Other (please specify) _____
- If you answered 0 to Q.4., that is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you.
If you answered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 please carry on.**
- 6 Choose one option:
a I delivered the lessons as they were explained in the lesson plans.
b I took the ideas from the lessons and incorporated them into my lesson in my own way.
c I did a mixture of both a and b.
 - 7 Which lessons did you use? Tick **all** the relevant lessons:
 - Goal setting – skills
 - Goal setting – language
 - Reading/listening strategies
 - Vocabulary strategies
 - Grammar strategies
 - Evaluating your own progress
 - 8 Why did you choose these lessons? Choose the **most important** reason.
They related to the content of my lessons
a They were easy for me to understand and simple to deliver
b I thought my students needed them
c I needed to fill in time
d No particular reason. It was the first one I picked up
e Another teacher said it was good
f Other (please specify) _____
 - 9 After you taught a lesson, how often did you try and integrate the ideas/principles behind it in later lessons?
a never b occasionally c sometimes d often e always
 - 10 How useful were the lessons for you as a teacher in the **classroom**? 1 = not useful 5 = very useful
1 2 3 4 5
 - 11 How useful were the lessons for you as a teacher in the **learning Centre**?
1 2 3 4 5
 - 12 How useful were the lessons for your **students'** learning?
1 2 3 4 5

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.