Promoting Learner Autonomy with *Business Proficiency*

by Stephanie Ashford and Tom Smith

What is learner autonomy?

The term learner autonomy, as it was originally coined by Henri Holec (1981), means ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. There are now many different ways of interpreting the elusive concept of learner autonomy, but it is generally agreed that autonomous learners understand and appreciate the purpose of their learning programme, take responsibility for their own learning, participate in the setting of learning goals, and regularly review and evaluate their learning.

For the purposes of this article, which is concerned with German-speaking business students using *Business Proficiency*, the term is used specifically to refer to the way that learning can take place outside the classroom, away from the direct instruction of the teacher. This may seem close to the German idea of ‘Selbststudium’ or self-study, but a distinction should be made between the guided self-study that younger students do at school (e.g. homework and project work) and a more ‘self-directed learning’ approach expected of students in higher education. Choosing to use a coursebook with students in class while at the same time promoting learner autonomy outside class may seem contradictory, but we believe that with *Business Proficiency* these two aspects can complement each other effectively.

Why promote learner autonomy?

As students progress from secondary school into higher education, they are exposed to a greater need for learner autonomy, and teachers and institutions play an important role in supporting and encouraging this necessary shift towards independence, with students taking increasing responsibility for their progress. In European higher education, this need has been reinforced by the introduction of the Bologna Process which has led to teaching institutions having to find ways and means of adapting and developing their courses, their timescales, and their budgets. As a result, Business English teaching has been subject to a number of changes, the most important being the reduction of contact hours. This may vary between institutions, but the overall result is that students may still be expected to reach C1 level in English (the usual requirement of a Bachelor curriculum), covering the same workload for the same number of credits but with fewer contact hours.

Inevitably, with fewer contact hours in the curriculum but the same requirement to cover the necessary material to reach C1 level, students will have to make up the difference outside class time. As these changes place more demands on students, so teachers will have to respond accordingly by offering more support and encouragement towards the idea of learner autonomy, and a greater selectivity and flexibility in how the material should be covered within the time available.

How to promote learner autonomy?

In the promoting of learner autonomy it is vital that teachers manage expectations by discussing with students at the outset what it means to be an independent learner, what is expected from them, and what the teacher can do to support them. For many students in their first semester, acquiring the study skills necessary to achieve learner autonomy may be a major challenge. It will help if teachers can lay down some ground rules regarding the work done out of class, and establish an informal ‘teacher-learner contract’ that both sides can adhere to.

In addition to communicating these ideas to students, teachers need to get together with colleagues to discuss ways of promoting learner autonomy and managing the workload within the constraints of reduced contact hours. This is especially important in institutions where teachers are working in a team, where courses are run in parallel, and where the exams are set jointly or centrally. Teachers can pool ideas, prioritise materials and units, and create a ‘united front’ when advising students on their self-study responsibilities. It is also useful to liaise with colleagues teaching subjects other than Business English, to see how they go about encouraging learner autonomy.
From the outset, *Business Proficiency* was designed for German-speaking business students as a complete Business English course in 16 units that takes them from B2 level (school leaver, first semester student) to C1 level – described in the Common European Framework (CEF) as effective operational proficiency. In order to achieve this, it was decided to make *Business Proficiency* ‘two books in one’ in which the first eight units consolidate the B2 level with added business vocabulary and communication skills work, and the second eight units raise the level to C1 with a greater emphasis on management topics and more complex language and skills. This has resulted in a substantial course with a broad topic range and many additional features such as video and audio files, interactive e-learning software and online links included with self-study in mind.

Most teachers are familiar with the need to prioritise materials when time is limited, and there are always some exercises or pages of a coursebook that they feel can be ‘skipped’ if time is short. However, any paring down should be done judiciously, ideally in consultation with students. If they are to reach the desired C1 level, then merely skipping material is not an option. The reality is that any sections of a unit not dealt with during contact time will become material for self-study. For Business English teachers, this becomes an issue of responding flexibly to change, and of managing expectations. So, how best to organize this division between what should be taught in class and what students can be expected to study outside class?

Typically, the types of task best done in class are those that help to prime students for a topic, those that introduce new concepts and key language, and those that create opportunities for face-to-face communication practice and allow the teacher to give immediate feedback. Likewise, the types of task that can be done outside class include those that involve reflection, discovery, and working at one’s own pace – i.e. reading, writing, and research as well as grammar and vocabulary practice and drilling. In any given unit of *Business Proficiency* there are tasks that are specifically designed to be done together in class, and others that can be given as self-study and therefore fit with the idea of learner autonomy. Each of the 16 units in the book is structured as follows:

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<td>A</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Business briefing</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
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Put simply, a teacher looking at the structure of any given unit and deciding which parts of it should be covered in class may probably consider opting for parts A, B, C and E, while regarding parts D and F as possibly suitable for study outside class. As an example, in Unit 12 Economics (p. 148), parts A, B, and C introduce new language relating to economics and important grammar points. Part D (the Business Leaders text on Keynes) could be a self-study option, as could the Consulting section in part F. This is not to suggest that such a rule-of-thumb approach to ‘filleting’ a unit should always be applied, and teachers should consider each unit on its individual suitability. There is a time element to
weigh in, and not all units require the same amount of time. Also, students will respond differently to certain topics that they find more interesting and relevant.

Communicating with students

When introducing the book, it is useful to go through the navigation section with students (pp. 4-7) and explain to them which parts of the book are specifically designed for self-study. In this way, priorities can be discussed and expectations established. It is important to be realistic about how much work can be covered, and to get agreement with the students on this. It is not helpful to heap more workload onto students than they can manage. On the other hand they should be aware from the outset that they will be required to do work outside of class time. For example, part of the ‘teacher-learner contract’ should be an understanding that if students are given an assignment to read a text as preparation for the next class, then they must do it, otherwise they might jeopardise their own progress and that of the class. Similarly, provision must be made during class time for reviewing and correcting tasks done outside class. (Note that we avoid the word ‘homework’ in favour of ‘assignment’ and ‘task’, which are better suited to a university context.)

Once students have shown that they can take responsibility for their learning in this way, the teacher can tailor the units to fit with the number of contact hours available. The pace of lessons can be stepped up, because the teacher will not have to devote so much class time to weaker students who are constantly striving to keep up with the others. These students can be given advice on what to do outside class to catch up, using (for example) the grammar and vocabulary exercises on the e-learning software available on the DVD and online. Equally, stronger students can be shown where to find additional exercises to ‘stretch’ them. As an example, when studying the topic vocabulary section (pp. 258-280) they could be asked to extend the lists.

Conclusion

Initiatives for promoting learner autonomy should not be seen as moving workload away from teachers and onto students, but rather as a constructive response to the changes happening in teaching institutions. Teachers need the agility to respond to these changes, and to cooperate with their students to develop workable solutions for covering the material necessary to achieve the desired C1 level. Business Proficiency is big enough to offer plenty of scope for self-study, and has the resources to support this ‘dual role’ approach. The many added features such as e-learning software, online links to additional resource material, and thematic vocabulary lists are designed to accommodate the shift to learner autonomy.

Summary

- Understand why it is important to promote learner autonomy.
  1) A key aspect of study in the higher education context
  2) The importance of the ‘teacher-learner contract’
  3) The target level can’t be reached in class time alone
- Discuss learner autonomy with students at the beginning of the course, and make the expectations (of yourself and your students) clear from the outset.
- Go through the main features of the book with students in your first session with them.
- Consciously plan how to make best use of class time.
- Set regular assignments to be done outside class, and be consistent in following them up.
- Create solidarity with colleagues and discuss ways of fostering a learning culture.