DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT LEARNING SKILLS TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

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Abstract: Independent learning is an educational approach in which students take an active role in setting goals, selecting resources, monitoring progress, and evaluating their learning. This article examines the meaning and value of independent learning and outlines practical classroom strategies for developing learners' autonomy. Drawing on the supplied IRIS Connect article and Immanuel Vinikas's overview published by Kaltura, it discusses self-monitoring, scaffolded questioning, feedback, collaboration, learner choice, lesson planning, reflective diaries, and the responsible use of digital resources. The article argues that independence does not mean learning without support: teachers remain essential as facilitators who model strategies, provide structure, and gradually transfer responsibility to students. When supported by clear goals and regular reflection, independent learning can strengthen motivation, confidence, self-regulation, problem-solving, and students' ability to manage their learning beyond the classroom.

Keywords: independent learning, learner autonomy, self-regulation, student motivation, self-assessment, reflective learning, teacher support, digital learning.

1. Introduction Contemporary education increasingly expects students not only to acquire information but also to understand how to learn. Knowledge changes rapidly, and learners need strategies that help them identify what they know, recognise what they need to learn, and choose effective ways to make progress. Independent learning responds to

this need by positioning students as active participants in their educational development rather than passive recipients of information.

The IRIS Connect article “Developing independent learning skills that improve outcomes” presents independent learning as a process in which pupils set goals, monitor and evaluate their academic development, and manage their motivation. It also reports the Education Endowment Foundation’s finding that self-regulated learning can have a high impact on progress at relatively low cost. The article gives a practical estimate of under £80 per pupil per year and refers to an average impact equivalent to eight months of progress. Such figures should be understood in the context of the source’s summary; the broader educational message is that teaching students to regulate their learning can be a cost-conscious way to support progress.

Vinikas (2024) similarly describes independent learning as students taking ownership of their learning by investigating topics, asking questions, setting goals, and monitoring progress. Together, these perspectives suggest that independence is not simply the completion of homework alone. It is a set of skills and habits that enable learners to make informed decisions about their learning while using teacher guidance and appropriate resources.

2. **The Concept and Importance of Independent** Learning Independent learning can be defined as a learner-centred approach in which students assume increasing responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating learning activities. Students identify goals, choose or use suitable resources, check their understanding, and decide what to do next. The teacher remains an important source of guidance, but responsibility gradually shifts from the teacher to the learner.

A central feature of this approach is self-regulation. Learners need to plan their work, sustain motivation, manage time, monitor their understanding, and reflect on results. These processes help students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. For example, a student learning English may set a weekly vocabulary goal, practise with

flashcards or audio materials, complete a short self-test, and revise words that are still difficult.

Independent learning can offer several educational benefits. First, it can improve motivation and confidence because students have a clearer sense of ownership over their progress. Second, it encourages learners to recognise effective strategies and identify areas that require further practice. Third, it creates opportunities for creativity, inquiry, and problem-solving. Finally, it can support transferable skills such as time management, organisation, initiative, and discipline. These skills are valuable not only in school or university but also in professional and personal life.

However, independent learning should not be interpreted as leaving students to manage everything by themselves. Learners differ in their prior knowledge, confidence, language ability, access to technology, and need for support. Some students may require explicit instruction and carefully structured tasks before they can work independently. Effective independence therefore develops progressively and inclusively.

3. T**he Teacher's Role in Developing Independent** Learners The teacher's role changes from being the sole provider of answers to being a facilitator who creates conditions for students to learn effectively. This includes explaining learning goals, modelling strategies, providing useful resources, asking questions that stimulate thought, and giving feedback that helps learners make decisions. A trusting student–teacher relationship is essential because students need to feel safe enough to make mistakes, ask questions, and discuss difficulties.

Scaffolding is particularly important. Teachers can begin by demonstrating how to complete a task, then practise it together with the class, and finally allow students to attempt a similar task independently. For instance, when teaching students how to write a paragraph, a teacher might first model planning and drafting, then guide a class paragraph, and later ask students to plan and write their own paragraphs using a checklist. Support can be reduced as learners become more capable.

Questioning is another powerful tool. Rather than immediately supplying an answer, a teacher can ask, “What have you tried so far?”, “Which evidence supports your answer?”, or “What could you do next?” Open-ended questions encourage learners to explain their reasoning and consider alternatives. The purpose is not to withhold help but to guide students towards strategies they can eventually use without assistance.

4. Practical Strategies for the Classroom

4.1. Set goals and encourage self-monitoring Students should learn to set clear, realistic, and challenging goals. A broad aim such as “improve my English” can be converted into a specific target, such as “learn and use fifteen topic-related words this week.” Students can then monitor their progress through short quizzes, checklists, or self-assessment scales. Peer assessment can also help learners compare their work with agreed criteria and identify next steps.

4.2. Provide meaningful choice Giving students a choice of topic, text, presentation format, or practice activity can increase engagement and help them take ownership of learning. Choice should be purposeful and bounded by the learning objectives. For example, students studying a short story might choose to write a review, prepare a presentation, or create a character map, while all options assess the same core understanding.

4.3. Use feedback to guide improvement Feedback should tell students what they have done successfully, what needs improvement, and what action they can take next. Written or oral comments are often more useful for learning than a score alone because they explain how to improve. Teachers can also invite students to respond to feedback by correcting a piece of work or setting a goal for the next task. This makes feedback part of learning rather than merely a judgement of performance.

4.4. Promote collaboration and peer learning Independent learning does not exclude collaboration. Small-group tasks allow students to exchange ideas, explain concepts, and learn from different approaches. A learner who explains a grammar rule to a peer may

deepen their own understanding, while the peer gains another explanation. Clear roles and shared success criteria help ensure that each student contributes rather than relying on one group member.

4.5. Involve students in lesson planning Teachers can ask students which aspects of a topic they find difficult, what questions they want to investigate, or which activities help them learn. Student input can inform lesson planning and make learning more relevant. This does not mean students determine every aspect of the curriculum; instead, their perspectives help teachers choose appropriate examples, pacing, and opportunities for practice.

4.6. Encourage reflective learning diaries A learning diary gives students a record of their goals, activities, challenges, and progress. After a lesson, students might answer three questions: What did I learn? What was difficult? What will I do next? Reviewing earlier entries helps them notice progress and identify strategies that work. Reflection is most effective when it leads to a concrete next step rather than a general statement such as “the lesson was good.”

4.7. Teach time management and routines Learners need help breaking larger tasks into manageable steps and allocating time realistically. A weekly study plan may include short, regular sessions, deadlines, and brief review periods. Predictable routines can make independent work less overwhelming, especially for learners who are new to self-directed study. Teachers can demonstrate how to prioritise tasks and encourage students to revise their plans when circumstances change.

4.8. Use digital resources critically Digital platforms can widen access to tutorials, dictionaries, audio materials, educational videos, and interactive practice. For example, a student learning to code might choose a beginner-friendly language, follow a tutorial, build a simple application, test it, and troubleshoot errors independently. A language learner might listen to a short recording, note unfamiliar expressions, practise pronunciation, and check understanding with a quiz. In both cases, students should be taught to evaluate the

reliability of online sources, protect their privacy, and avoid confusing watching content with active learning.

5. An Example: Independent Learning in an English Lesson

A practical example can be developed around the topic “Describing people” in an English-language class. At the beginning of the week, students set an individual target, such as learning ten adjectives and using them accurately in speech. The teacher provides a list of possible resources, including a coursebook page, a dictionary, a short video, and a vocabulary-learning application. Students select the resources that suit their needs and make a simple practice schedule.

During lessons, the teacher models how to record a word, its meaning, pronunciation, and an example sentence. Students then work in pairs to create descriptions and use a checklist to assess whether they have used the target vocabulary. For homework, each student records a one-minute description of a fictional character or a person they are permitted to describe. They listen to the recording, identify two strengths and one area for improvement, and revise it.

At the end of the week, students complete a short self-assessment and write a reflection in their learning diaries. They compare their initial goal with their actual progress and decide what to practise next. The teacher reviews these reflections to identify common difficulties and provide targeted support. This example combines learner choice, explicit modelling, self-monitoring, peer collaboration, feedback, and reflection without removing the teacher’s guidance.

6. Challenges and Ways to Address Them

Several challenges may affect the development of independent learning. Students may lack confidence, struggle to plan their time, or depend on teachers for immediate answers. Some may have limited access to devices or reliable internet. Others may find self-assessment difficult because they do not yet understand the learning criteria. These

difficulties should be treated as reasons to provide support, not as evidence that independent learning is unsuitable.

Teachers can respond by starting with short, achievable tasks and gradually increasing complexity. Checklists, worked examples, clear deadlines, and structured reflection questions make expectations visible. Where digital access is limited, printed materials, classroom libraries, peer discussion, and offline activities can provide alternatives. Teachers should also check that the workload is reasonable and that students know when and how to request help.

At school level, independent learning is more likely to become sustainable when teachers receive professional support, students can provide feedback, and additional study support is available when needed. A consistent approach across subjects can help learners recognise that planning, self-assessment, and reflection are general learning skills rather than isolated classroom activities.

7. Conclusion

Independent learning is an important approach to helping students become more confident, self-regulated, and active participants in education. It involves setting goals, selecting resources, managing time, monitoring progress, seeking feedback, and reflecting on outcomes. The strategies discussed in this article—scaffolding, effective questioning, meaningful choice, collaboration, formative feedback, learning diaries, and responsible use of digital resources—can be integrated into everyday teaching.

The key principle is that learner autonomy develops through guided practice. Teachers should not simply transfer responsibility to students without preparation; they should model effective strategies, establish supportive routines, and gradually reduce assistance as students gain competence. When schools, teachers, and learners share responsibility for the learning process, independent learning can support academic progress and equip students with skills that remain useful throughout their lives.

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