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## UNIT 4 HELPING THE LEARNER TO BE AUTONOMOUS

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to help the teachers to enable their learners to be independent learners. These learners will tend to be self-reflective, aware of their weaknesses and have the ability to overcome their challenges. Therefore, the unit will stress on:

- 1) Shifting the focus from 'what to learn' to 'how to learn'
- 2) Examining 'how to do' procedures

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Deepthi is an autonomous learner. She has the willingness and capacity to learn on her own. She is in class 8. One day, the teacher gave her class a task. In groups of four, the students had to discuss who their favorite woman leader was and tell the class about her. The focus was on justifying their choice from among four leaders. There were cue cards that included a few biographical details and two quotes each by the four women.

When it was Deepthi's turn, she summed up Mrs. Gandhi's life and concluded it by linking her life to what Mrs. Gandhi had said. One of the quotes was about forgiving the sinner. Deepthi said that Mrs. Gandhi must have had a number of enemies because of her position and she must have forgiven them. And hence, what she said must have come from her own experiences.

The class teacher said, "next", and moved on. Quite a few students simply read or summed up what they had found in their cues. Then, it was Nalini's turn. She spoke about Mother Theresa. She too related what the holy nun said meant in her life and to the life of others.

**To be autonomous, the learner has to know what to learn and how to learn it too.** They must also feel responsible enough to want to learn. This would involve a good deal of **willingness** and a **readiness to take risk** by the learners.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Is Deepthi’s teacher someone who facilitates students to be autonomous learners? How could she have encouraged autonomous learning?

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- 2) Is Nalini an autonomous learner?

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**4.2 AUTONOMOUS LEARNING: THE TEACHER’S ROLE**

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In the situation we just examined, only two learners understood learning in the right sense.

Although the teacher did not appreciate or comment on what Deepthi had done, Nalini learned how she might approach the task from her classmate. She could perceive the difference in the quality of the presentations made by Deepthi and the rest of her class. Then, she made a conscious choice and chose to do something similar to what Deepthi had done.

The example illustrates how an autonomous learner demonstrates:(i)a willingness to learn, (ii) a realization that learning is their own responsibility, (iii)an ability to make choices, and (iv)the courage to take risk. Neither Deepthi nor Nalini might be able to consciously analyze what they have done. But, they constructed effective discourse. This shows their awareness of the parameters for not just the presentation but communication itself. They need guidance to become conscious of what makes their response appealing. It will help them transfer the knowledge to other areas of communication. Only an autonomous learner-teacher can give this kind of support.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Does autonomous learning involve choices?

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2) Does autonomous learning mean learning without help?

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### 4.3 PROCEDURES FOR SUPPORTING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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What is ‘learning’? In the context of a language classroom, learning may be understood as becoming aware of certain cognitive processes and demonstrating the awareness through language use.

We as teachers may use different procedures and supportive material that encourage this approach.

For example, we can develop a few paragraphs on the blackboard together with the class if we want to teach them paragraph writing. Students soon take charge if we:

- give them time to think,
- comment on and justify choices, and
- value their contributions.

The accompanying discussion will familiarize them with the parameters for evaluating their own paragraphs. We can also start the activity after giving the students a checklist for writing a paragraph. Students may also select paragraphs from any subject and discuss them in class.

Such activities guide the learner to appreciate the cognitive processes involved in developing their potential to think and communicate independently as well in collaboration with others.

For example, consider describing a character. In this context, the first question for us teachers to think about is, what do learners need to know in order to do it? The answer may be found in samples of authentic communication, sometimes available in the textbook itself. It is also possible for the teacher to ask the class to look for descriptions of characters in the books they read.

This may be followed by the teacher analyzing a few descriptions together with the students. Eliciting responses to questions such as:

What does the writer say about the character?

What do you think about the character?

What does the character think about himself or herself?

What do other characters think about him/ her?

How do they behave in different situations?

Is there a change/growth in the character during the story? Where does it happen?

At this stage, the focus must be shifted to the use of appropriate discourse. The class may examine the samples available to them and choose which they prefer. The teacher may draw their attention to various lexical and grammatical choices too.

Noticing different choices, considering and examining them during the process of writing will help the learner grow to be independent, especially when supported by the teacher.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) How does collaborative writing support independent learning?

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2) Does the 'how to do' activity in the class help students learn beyond the classroom?

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**4.4 MATERIALS TO ENCOURAGE  
AUTONOMOUS LEARNING**

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Miss Devi likes to experiment with different kinds of materials. One day she read a story to the class and asked them to write it in groups of three. She gave two sample beginnings and told them to share their first sentence with the class. Her examples were:

**It would never have happened if he hadn't been to his friend's birthday party.**

**Do you ever wonder what happened to the passenger you met on a train journey last year?**

In ten minutes, students began to respond and the teacher got six different

beginnings on the blackboard. The discussion focused on how the stories should be continued.

Such classroom procedures illustrate how we may shift our focus from 'what' to 'how'. Consider the following activity as another case in point.

The textbook included a speech and a few comprehension questions which addressed only the content of the text. To teach the class the 'how' of a speech, Miss Devi designed a few activities which included the following questions:

The speaker narrates two experiences to drive home his point. Can you replace them with your own to give the same message?

If you are giving a speech will you give the message or a story first? Or, will you alternate a story with the message throughout the speech?

Can you think of any famous people's sayings or lines from poems that may be appropriate? Where will you insert them, in the speech?

Only a few of her students are willing to take responsibility for their learning now, and Miss Devi knows it. Like many other teachers, she also thinks that the others must be shown the direction now.

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) What aspects of learning do such practices highlight?

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- 2) What kind of activities encourage self-monitoring?

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## 4.5 EVALUATION PROCEDURES FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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Formative Evaluation, as we all know, informs us about how individual students are progressing in relation to the target learning outcomes. What is most often neglected is, how it may be used to teach the learner what to learn and how to learn it. In other words, formative evaluation procedures, if designed and implemented to help students, can guide them to learn independently. Instead of treating them as testing tools, we may use them to support learning.

The following situation and the teacher’s response helps us understand her attitude to formative evaluation.

The teacher evaluated and returned the answer scripts. Quite a few students thought that they had done their internal assessment reasonably well and felt disappointed by the marks they were given. When the class was over, a few of them followed her to the staff room. After a good deal of hesitation, one of them came up and asked the only question they all wanted to ask, “Teacher, I expected a higher score for this question. Have I not answered it correctly?”

The teacher said, “The answer is correct. But, you have not organized it well”. Her other comments were on vocabulary, grammar, paragraphing, handwriting etc. The students felt discouraged and no wiser. She also carefully defended and justified all her evaluation procedures; she discussed every response, answered all their questions patiently, and added a few marks here and there. They left feeling better.

**Check Your Progress 5**

- 1) Examine how the teacher’s response reflects the power relations inherent in a teacher -dependent context.

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- 2) Does the teacher’s response help them prepare for their next internal assessment?

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**4.6 AUTHENTIC MATERIALS AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING**

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Most often, learning does not happen as soon as something is taught. Students may do what is expected of them, in terms of answering questions or writing an essay, without actually realizing its significance.

They may not be able to relate it to the other things that they have already learnt although the textbook planners expect them to. There are other times when we introduce a new point of learning, and students happen to understand something that we had ‘taught’ some time ago. Learning does not happen in a linear fashion. More so, in a language learning context. Consider the following examples.

The student stood up, and said excitedly, “Now, I know when to use the past perfect tense”. The teacher was surprised because she had taught the tense more than a month ago and she scored one hundred percent in her grammar test soon after that. So, the teacher asked her to explain what she meant. And this was her reply, “For my history project, I read an essay on our struggle for Independence and in the geography class we read about the continental drift. I had learned about them and learned the past perfect too”.

The incident shows that the teacher’s instruction made sense only after the learner had the opportunity to notice the use of the tense in materials outside the English classroom. It also illustrates, among many other things, the joy of independent learning.

Indeed, the opportunities we create in the classroom are restricted in number and nature too. Therefore, the focus has to be on the *how* of learning and this cannot be done without depending on the authentic material that is available outside the classroom. Identifying the source of learning and the points to be learnt are the two kinds of guidance the learner will find useful. This is best done when we focus more on discourse and less on discrete elements. Learning to use vocabulary is more important than learning about words in isolation. Similarly, learning to use tenses appropriately is more important than learning the rules. Authentic material creates innumerable opportunities for showing the learner the right direction. The more we relate such material to their background knowledge, the richer the student’s autonomous learning, beyond the classroom. But, the classroom has to be the lab where they experiment with their learning in a productive form with the teacher – and – peer support. Here is an example of how we may bring different kinds of discourse, activate cognitive processes, and shift them from the path of autonomous comprehension to autonomous production.

Read the beginning of the poem *Granny’s tree climbing* by Ruskin Bond and try to think of the usual questions that follow it:

My grandmother was a genius. You’d like to know why? Because she could climb trees. Spreading or high, She’d be up their branches in a trice. And mind you, When last she climbed a tree, she was sixty-two. Ever since childhood, she’d had this gift

For being happier in a tree than in a lift; And, though, as years went by, she would be told That climbing trees should stop when one grew old And that growing old should be gone about gracefully She’d laugh and say, ‘Well, I’ll grow old disgracefully’.

Our students usually answer questions such as the following:

- 1) Why is the poetic persona’s grandmother a genius?
- 2) How old was she?
- 3) What does she like to do?
- 4) What gift did she have?
- 5) What do people tell her? Does she agree with them?

Now, reflect on the following question:

This is a news report on Lata Khare who participated in a marathon. Imagine that she is your grandmother and write a story or poem on her. If you would prefer to, imagine that you saw the marathon and write a letter to a friend. Whatever you write, your purpose is to highlight what you admire in the winner.

<http://relax.life/true-inspiring-story-elderly-woman-ran-marathon-barefoot-won.html>

Retrieved on 17 July 2018

The next day, Baramati Marathon was about to commence. Everyone lined up were geared up in their sports shoes, snazzy shorts and tracks, sweat absorbing tees. And there she was, the 65 year old Lata Bhagwan Khare, wearing a torn Saree (Indian traditional wear), bare footed, tears in her eyes.

She argued with the organizers. They were not ready to break rules and let her participate in the marathon. She pleaded, she begged, and her sincere emotional appeal touched their hearts and they decided to approve her participation just for a lark, not even giving her a ghost of a chance to win.

The organizers playfully cheered her, 'Go for it Aunty!' The Marathon started and she hitched her saree just above her ankles. She ran like a wizard, truly a dream run, like a 16 year old. People standing alongside the path were totally taken aback by this sprightly old lady sprinting and broke into a loud cheer.



### **Lata Khare leaves all other senior citizens far, far behind**

She ran like someone possessed. She could just see her husband's life hanging by a slender thread and the winning amount in front of her eyes. She didn't care about the hard gravel and pebbles on her way. Her feet bled, but she just ran and ran.

### Check Your Progress 6

- 1) Give any three reasons for supplementing the textbook with authentic material for encouraging autonomous learning?

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- 2) How does mixed- genre- approach guide independent learning?

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## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

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Learning involves a great deal of cognitive processing and it is a lifelong process. If we learn about how to do something, we will acquire the confidence to do it. The awareness reduces anxiety and helps us focus on the task on hand. We will be able to improve our performance over a period of time, and transfer our learning to doing other things too.

In this context, the first step a teacher takes is, understand the various steps necessary for participating in a communicative event. Then, she evolves procedures to raise the students' consciousness of the steps. Thus, the whole process is set in motion - helping the learner to be autonomous. In other words, the teacher has three responsibilities: become a conscious learner, break down learning the 'how' into teachable steps, and create activities to nurture responsible learning. An autonomous learner-teacher appreciates them, and adopts independent learning practices.

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## 4.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The teacher could have appreciated the nuances in Deepthi's presentation and given her feedback on how she connected the different points and created a perspective on Mrs. Gandhi's life. Instead of repeating what she had read, Deepthi highlighted an aspect of the leader's personality that she admired. This made the portrait comprehensive and coherent.

Analytical feedback serves two purposes. First, it encourages learners to continue to take risks while learning something new. Secondly, it helps the

class become conscious of how they may approach the task using the given information.

- 2) Nalini is an autonomous learner for quite a few reasons.

She did not follow the class. In choosing to learn from Deepthi's answer, she demonstrated that she could take decisions, select from available choices, and take risks. She paid attention to the details of the other presentations and monitored her own performance. She knew what to learn. Students like Nalini and Deepthi make invaluable contributions in collaborative learning environments.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Content and language both offer innumerable choices. While participating in any communicative event, the learner has to think about what is appropriate. At every stages/he also pays attention to what s/he understands. This, in turn, is determined by her/his own background knowledge and her/his readiness to learn something new. For example, when the teacher is developing a paragraph on the blackboard, the learner may choose to focus on vocabulary, sentence formation, coherence, or cohesion. While participating in the discussion, a few learners, in fact, may be thinking about communication in other subjects like science or geography. The personality of the learner, her/his needs and most importantly her/his willingness to learn play a key role in the choices a learner makes. Not everyone likes to take risk. Some learners are prone to anxiety. Even adult learners, sometimes, cannot cope with the stress that accompanies the choice to learn. **Taking these factors into consideration, a teacher needs to create opportunities for learning.**
- 2) No. We take help from teachers, peers, and others around us. We also have sources such as books and the internet to learn and seek help from. And, the responsibility to show the direction lies with the teacher. Guiding the learner to identify and examine meaningful choices, providing constructive feedback, and offering guidance during the process of learning are some of the ways in which the teacher can nurture autonomous learning.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) A collaborative classroom supports learners both emotionally and academically. The teacher's guidance lowers their anxiety levels and builds their confidence to think towards the communicative goals. As different responses are considered and discussed, students become aware of the various choices they have. Discussions with the teacher help them reflect on what is relevant to a context and sharpens their ability to take decisions. They learn to think critically, examine content and language, focus on the nature of discourse to appreciate coherence and cohesion, and develop as language users.
- 2) Yes. The activity directs them towards what they must 'notice'. It will show them how to learn it in collaboration with others. Soon, they will be able to notice what is relevant to their own learning and grow aware of how to learn it too. More importantly, they begin to find new ways of learning on their own. What they learn in the language class they may apply in their

subject classes. They will be able to think across languages since most of them know more than one language.

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Practices that operationalize learning and approach it in terms of manageable goals address learning as a cognitive process. They also illustrate the teacher's understanding that the cognitive processes are stimulated by affective and academic factors.

They make learners realize that learning involves decision-making at every stage. And hence, they are encouraged to know that they may learn not just from the teacher or the textbook but other sources including their peers. They are equally encouraged to notice what they must learn, the idea of taking risks and participating in the activity, making mistakes, accepting constructive criticism and trying to learn. The fact that they are shown the direction through authentic samples and analysis and given the parameters for evaluating their work, shows them that they have the responsibility to learn to do better. Evidently, teachers' constructive feedback, given during the process of developing a text, puts them on the path of responsible learning.

- 2) Activities that encourage self-monitoring:

How do I do something?

How do I evaluate what I have done?

Guiding the learner to find answers to these two questions is central to helping them to be autonomous.

The process of learning begins with answering the first question. One of the ways in which this may be done is, help the learner identify the small manageable goals/ steps inherent to a communicative task. It is similar to preparing the route map to a destination. For example, if the learner has to discuss pollution, they will need:

Ideas

a perspective

a template/format/discourse

language (topic -specific vocabulary, some awareness of sentence construction)

Necessary support may be drawn from authentic material, print or online which familiarizes them with what is expected of them and reinforces any previous learning. This conceptual and linguistic guidance must be followed by a class discussion to build their confidence and guide them to produce something meaningful. Without this scaffolding, they will be able to learn very little.

All these activities – comprehension, examination, selection and justification of choices involve cognitive processes that happen simultaneously along with an equally challenging process, decision-making. And, decision-making involves evaluation. The ability to take informed decisions depends upon the learner's awareness of the parameters for evaluating the choices

in any specific context. Therefore, a collaborative environment that gives the learner the confidence and courage to take risk, through classroom activities, creates the right forum for helping the learners to be autonomous.

### Check Your Progress 5

- 1) Situations mentioned in the Unit illustrate how students are programmed to believe that the teacher's response is the only acceptable response. This discourages them from any critical thinking. Even those students who may have an opinion, choose to remain silent because they do not want their self-respect hurt. Language learning has to be synonymous with becoming aware of infinite possibilities. If the content is put in a straitjacket by the teacher, the students will be left with no choice but to learn everything by rote. What is equally unfortunate, this style of learning gets transferred to the learning of the other subjects like sciences or social sciences and students become more and more dependent on memorizing. They stop thinking.
- 2) No, what helps any learner is the awareness of how they may approach a question. Not the teacher's answer. They must appreciate how their response has to meet with the requirements inherent to the question. This understanding is a pre-requisite to answering any question effectively. At the same time, the teacher also has a responsibility; she should make the question one hundred percent clear. Consider the following simple questions:
  - a) What are the most important differences between them?
  - b) What are the three most important differences between them?

Even when we specify the number of differences it will still be challenging to evaluate the response objectively. We need to consider questions such as, are we going to accept the differences in any order? Do we, as examiners, rate one of the differences more important than the rest and hence expect it to be presented first? How much value do we attach to the introduction and conclusion? Will we give any extra marks for any unexpected but relevant details? In case we find a response that discusses their importance explicitly and describes the differences in a specific order, are we willing to give it higher score? If the contents are presented in ungrammatical English, what should we do?

These are all our concerns. If the learners, too, becomes aware of them they will be on the path of independent learning. They will know how they may approach the question and what to include and how to include it in their answer. This kind of conceptual knowledge demands a great deal of cognitive processing. It is transferrable too. Acquiring it in one context, the learners use it across subjects and languages. They will be better prepared for any assessment because they begin to think about the possibilities the content and language offer.

If formative evaluation is used to help students realize that the question itself determines what the answer should be, it will serve the right purpose – learn what to learn and how to learn it too.

### Check Your Progress 6

- 1) We will discuss three reasons here. There may be more, depending on the context.

Texts are selected with a specific level of proficiency in mind. Rarely are all our students at the same level. Some of them may be able to work with 'advanced' material in terms of both concepts and English. Others may need guidance with the language of the prescribed texts. There may also be first generation learners like Deepthi and Nalini, who are independent learners in spite of the fact that they are from economically backward families and receive no academic support outside the classroom. Therefore, we use authentic texts and enhance the relevance of the prescribed instructional material. Students will become aware of where to learn from and how to learn it.

Secondly, the ability to communicate in any situation includes an awareness of the contextual parameters such as formality or informality, purpose, relationship between the interlocutors, format or structure, and the language among many other things. Each topic or subject demands topic-specific vocabulary and a reasonable command of its use. There is no gainsaying the fact that the textbook cannot provide the learner with adequate support. If the teacher directs the class' attention to the material available outside the classroom, some of them try to learn from it. The teacher may strengthen and facilitate their learning further. The spinoff is, what independent learners do which enhances the quality of the work in the classroom.

Thirdly, comprehension precedes production. If students can be encouraged to read different texts outside the classroom, their class time can be used for sharpening their production skills. Spending most of the class time on comprehension jeopardizes the opportunities essential for active practice, which in turn, will encourage rote learning.

- 2) We can express the same thought in different genres and forums. For example, the textbook may include a poem on bullying. The learner can have an introduction to a wide array of texts that present the concept – formal and informal complaints, essays, letters, news stories, notices, pamphlets, and stories - followed by a discussion of the differences. This helps them understand the significance of the nuances of communication. It will also guide them to notice the features of language use in academic situations which is most important in our Indian context where English is used more for academic than non-academic purposes. Once they notice what they have to learn, they may try to learn it without the teacher's support.

