

Learner Autonomy and the European Language Portfolio



Language Learner Autonomy is one of the most important principles and benefits of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). As a central CEFR principle, it also guides the development of a *Common Framework of Reference for Languages in Canada* (CFRLC), a national project involving various education stakeholders and led by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT). Its application in practice is supported by the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) and by its Canadian versions, including CASLT's *The Canadian Language Portfolio for Teachers* and its *Assessment in Action Toolkit*.

What Do Autonomous Learners Do?

Autonomous learners:

- become actively involved in all aspects of their language learning: planning, implementing, and evaluating
- understand the purpose of their learning program, as they set up their own learning goals
- grasp the usefulness of each competence developed, as they monitor and apply them in real-life contexts
- are able to self-assess, based on a series of positive descriptors ("Can Do" statements) associated with each of the CEFR levels
- recognize that they are responsible for their own learning progress
- adopt a proactive attitude towards language learning

Why Is Learner Autonomy Important?

In general, learner autonomy:

- leads to success in learning a second/foreign language, since learners' focus is on what they themselves establish to be of importance to them
- helps learners to integrate the language skills they acquire in their daily lives

- fosters self-confidence in learners, who also develop life-long learning skills

In Canada, developing learner autonomy may be the motivational tool needed to:

- help improve the outcomes of second language programs
- decrease student attrition in these programs

What Is the Teachers' Role in Learner Autonomy?

While considering the maturity and language levels of the learners, teachers can:

- fully involve learners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning
- encourage learners to reflect continuously on the process and content of their learning
- help learners to engage in regular self-assessment
- ensure that the target language is the medium, as well as the goal, of all learning (see Little 2007)
- facilitate a wide range of roles for learners (i.e. conversation between friends, formal discussion/meeting, addressing an audience, etc.)



What Are the Next Steps for Teachers to Increase Learner Autonomy?

- review provincial or territorial curriculum documents for learner outcomes related to learner autonomy, self-reflection, and goal-setting
- examine textbooks and programs and note where learner autonomy is encouraged
- support setting individual student goals to encourage autonomy and promote greater learner involvement and responsibility
- become familiar with the CEFR and the ELP, as well as with its Canadian versions, and employ them as teaching principles and tools, incorporating the CEFR self-assessment grids

Where Do I Find More Info on Learner Autonomy?

To find more information on language learner autonomy, consider the following:

- research and identify complementary resources on the web, such as:
 - * www.ailarenla.org
 - * <http://innovationinteaching.org/autonomy/practical-tips/>
 - * http://www.innovationinteaching.org/autonomy_bibliography.php
- join a professional learning community to discuss classroom initiatives and successes related to the CEFR and the ELP implementation in Canada with colleagues, such as CASLT's *Online Professional Learning Community (OPLC)* or *Online Discussion Forum*.

Publications on Learner Autonomy and CEFR

Here are some examples:

- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (2001). "We're All in It Together: Exploring the Interdependence of Teacher and Learner Autonomy." In L. Karlsson, F. Kjisik and J. Nordlund (eds.), *All Together Now. Papers from the 7th Nordic Workshop on Autonomous Language Learning*, Helsinki, Sep. 2000, 45–56.
- Little, D., J. Ridley and E. Ushioda. (2002). *Towards Greater Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (2007). "Language Learner Autonomy: Some Fundamental Considerations Revisited." *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 1.1, 14–29.
- Ushioda, E. (1996). *Learner Autonomy 5: The Role of Motivation*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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