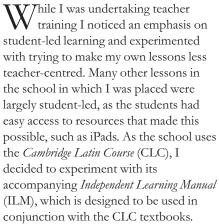# An Investigation into Independent Learning Using the *Cambridge Latin Course* Independent Learning Manual with Year 9 Students

by Dru Patel

While I was undertaking teacher training I noticed an emphasis on student-led learning and experimented with trying to make my own lessons less teacher-centred. Many other lessons in the school in which I was placed were largely student-led, as the students had easy access to resources that made this possible, such as iPads. As the school uses the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CLC), I decided to experiment with its accompanying *Independent Learning Manual* (ILM), which is designed to be used in conjunction with the CLC textbooks.

In the school Latin is an extracurricular activity that students may choose from Year 8. In choosing to do Latin and consistently attending lessons at 8:00 am twice a week these students have demonstrated a committed attitude to the subject. I chose to see how the Year 9 Latin students would respond to an independent learning approach using the CLC ILM. The group is high-achieving but consists of a range of attainment. All of the students in the group are studying at least one modern foreign language and all have experienced innovative teaching or presentation methods in lessons in Latin and their other subjects.

What is independent learning?

Independent learning does not have a universally agreed definition (Broad, 2006). Accordingly there are problems with implementing independent learning into lessons as there is no set guideline for what an independent learning lesson should look like. Independent learning is often given many similar names, such as 'personalisation', 'self-directed learning', 'self-regulated learning' or 'student-centred learning' (Meyer *et al.*, 2008). The aims of all of these approaches, though the practices may differ, focus on teaching students to learn for themselves, and in turn empower them in their learning whatever the context. Therefore, independent learning can be taken to be a concept that empowers students over time to learn by themselves (Broad, 2006, p. 121). This empowerment of students is sometimes referred to as 'learner autonomy'. Broad's definition of autonomy describes an ability to learn in a logical and appropriate manner that suits the topic matter (2006, p. 120). In doing so, the learner should recognise the need to organise their own learning around the topic they wish to learn. Learners therefore need to have the skills in place before they can take part in independent learning effectively. Knight and Tait (1996, p. 6) suggest that the image that independent learning evokes is that of a *solitary* student. This, they say, is misleading. Actually the independence lies in the choices that a student makes. These choices include the topic which they will focus on in their work and their methods of enquiry. This is a key idea that I kept in mind as I observed the students working through the CLC ILM. I was curious as to how far the ILM seemed to encourage students to work on their own or whether it also allowed for pair- or group-work.

As mentioned above, it is widely agreed that students must first learn certain skills in order for independent learning to be successful (Broad, 2006; Knight and Tate, 1996; Meyer *et al.,* 2008; Rogers, 2013). These may involve some or all of the following:

– <u>Research</u>: to ascertain what information and what quality of information they should use.
– <u>Problem solving</u>: to tackle a task or to decide which method is best for approaching a task.
– <u>Technological</u>: if using technology, to be familiar with which sites or apps are appropriate for a task.
– <u>Group work</u>: to gain and share ideas with their peers.
– <u>Resilience</u>: to keep trying beyond a first attempt at a task.
– <u>Motivation</u>: for themselves and to support other learners around them.
– <u>Initiative</u>: to make a decision about a task, whether it is how to perform it or whether to tackle it in the first place.
– <u>Responsibility</u>: to be accountable for the depth or quality of their learning.
– <u>Evaluation</u>: to demonstrate an understanding of what works and what does not.

Most practitioners of independent learning are agreed that for any sort of self-directed learning to occur, a student must have an end point or target in mind

(Knight and Tait, 1996). This sort of goal-orientation means that a student will be more motivated to learn and to take responsibility for the way in which they learn. Setting a target enables students to develop their evaluative skills too, as it encourages them to reflect on their work or progress and consider what made their learning successful.

Meyer *et al.* (2008) claim that a key factor in independent learning is the shift of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student. Again, it is emphasised that independent learning does not mean that a student necessarily needs to be working alone, but that teachers play a central role in enabling and supporting students in their independent learning. Meyer *et al.* put forward that there are several phases that students must complete for effective learning so that they develop processes of self-regulation. Firstly, the 'planning' phase involves setting a target or goal. Secondly, the 'pace and direction' phase describes how the student works towards the target they have set for themselves. The final phase, 'evaluation', involves the student reflecting on their work or on the methods they have employed in order to judge how effective the learning was after a set time. This essentially means that students consider whether or not they have met their target and what helped them to or hindered them from achieving what they had set out to do in the first place. Meyer *et al.* go on to state that an 'enabling environment' is necessary for independent learning to be successful. This 'enabling environment' does not just include readily-available resources for students to use as and when they need them, but also that the teacher should be 'knowledgeable about the work being done'.

The benefits of independent learning

There has been more of a move towards independent learning across the curriculum in recent years in order to prepare students more effectively for the expectations of higher education. Independent learning is a concept that promises to enhance students' learning experiences and is encouraged by the universities themselves (Higher Education Academy, 2014). Meyer *et al.* present a plethora of benefits of independent learning. Among these are 'improved academic achievement; increased motivation and confidence; greater student awareness of their limitations and their ability to manage them; enabling teachers to provide differentiated tasks for students' (2008, pp. 1-2). The article goes on to describe another study which suggests that students who learn independently are more motivated to learn and enjoy the material more as they are actively involved in it compared to students who study in 'more restrictive environments'. Independent learning may also raise students' self-esteem because they are able to see their progress as a direct result of their own decision making and effort. Teachers may also play a role in the 'evaluation' phase of the lesson by giving feedback to students about their progress.

The problems with independent learning

One of the main concerns with independent learning is resource management for the teacher. It can be difficult to keep on top of the resources that students may need in a lesson as well as the range of topics they might be working on, especially if they are given a free choice. It is also demanding for one teacher, regardless of their experience, to demonstrate 'on the spot' knowledge to cater to different students' different learning needs all in the same class. Independent learning may also be problematic in terms of the material that students employ to learn or explore a topic. Students may need to be directed towards material that contains accurate information that is pitched at the level of their understanding and that it is readily available. Time spent on fruitless research or on the incorrect completion of tasks is a wasted learning opportunity. Therefore, rather than setting the students a completely open-ended task to carry out, I used the ILM as the main resource. It was suitably pitched to their age group and was backed up with other resources as required – the CLC text book and online digital materials which students could access through their personal iPads.

Research questions

My overall research question was to investigate how the students responded to independent learning approaches to learning Latin using the CLC ILM. There were three sub-questions, as detailed below.

1. Do school-age students learn effectively using an independent learning approach?

I wanted to consider whether independent learning works well with the school-age students in my class. Much of the literature I have come across on this topic is written with a focus on students in higher education. For this reason, I chose to work with a class of Year 9 students.

2. How well do students set their own targets and evaluate their progress?

Research suggests that students gain the most from independent learning if they have a focus or a goal to work towards. How well do the students form a target to work towards each lesson and how detailed are their evaluations at the end?

3. What do the students think should be the role of the teacher in the independent learning lesson?

The literature suggests no clear guidelines for the role the teacher should play during the lesson. To approach this question, I asked the students' own opinions on what they feel the teacher could do to promote their independent learning.

Findings

I carried out my investigation by using a questionnaire, classroom observation notes and interviews with some of the students. All of the students' names have been changed to retain anonymity. In the class of 16 students I focused on two individuals – a boy Terry and a girl Izzy - and a group of students comprising two boys and two girls.

Terry

In the first lesson, Terry worked in a group with David, James and Jerry. The

students were mostly working together in a group of four or sometimes independently. There was very little pair work. Although there was some off-topic conversation, the students refocused themselves quickly. Where they were unsure, the students were confident using their exercise books to clarify grammar points as well as resources made by the teacher for noun endings. All four students were happy to ask the teacher and each other for help. There was no real leader in the group as all students worked well together and supported each other in different areas. For example, Terry tended to ask for help with grammar and James for vocabulary; these problems were resolved either through asking others in the group or asking the teacher for help. All of the students, except James, set themselves a target that was based around improving their grammar. James' target was set around improving vocabulary and he aimed to do this through looking up as few words as possible when reading through a Latin story. In the lessons that followed, Terry worked alone and used a variety of resources to help him achieve his ongoing target of understanding participles. These resources included his iPad, CLC textbook, exercise book, CSCP website and resources made by the teacher. Terry had no interaction with any other students during these lessons. He was completely on task for the full duration of the lesson and spent the majority of his time working on grammar exercises from the online e-CLC. Where he was unsure, he was very comfortable approaching the teacher for an explanation or direction to the appropriate resources. His target for all four lessons remained the same: to understand participles. In the final lesson Terry reviewed his target, writing: 'I now understand and can recognise the present participle, perfect passive participle and the perfect active participle'. He had written his own grammar note in the booklet even though *he had not completed any of the questions* that the booklet had presented on the Latin. Terry demonstrated an interesting approach to setting targets: he set himself a target which continued over the course of the independent learning lessons instead of one for each lesson. In his questionnaire, Terry stated that he had set himself one or two targets over the course of the independent learning lessons, spending

between 45-60 minutes to achieve them. I would say, having seen him work, that he was accurate in describing his work in this way. He identified that he had used the CLC textbook, his exercise book and iPad in the lessons but did not seem to view the teacher as a resource for his learning. He said that he liked how the booklet enabled him to learn at his own pace and 'focus on the things you choose'. On the other hand, he felt that the ILM 'could be quite boring and tedious'. Terry reiterated his feelings in the interview. He felt that the ILM could be boring at times and so made it 'hard to keep on target...but it was useful for clearing out gaps in your knowledge'. Terry clearly utilised his time in the independent learning lessons to revise grammar that he felt he needed more work on. When asked further about his choice of materials in the lesson, Terry said that he did not really enjoy using the ILM. He felt that in using just the booklet, 'the teacher was not needed and could be replaced by the iPad and textbook.' He stated that he had 'no real preference either way but [preferred] the teaching experience of an actual human being!' Terry valued having a teacher present and participating in the lesson as much as he was and seemed to express the view that learning is 'sequential', possibly meaning that he preferred to be shown an example or taught a skill before practising it himself.

Izzy

For all four lessons, Izzy worked on her own. As she was working alone, I could not observe any conversations she had. When I quizzed her on her approach, she said that she preferred the comprehension questions in English on the Latin story instead of a written translation of the story from Latin into English as it gave her more of an overview of the story. She also reported that the comprehension also *drew her attention to Latin grammar points*. The booklet seemed to match the methodical approach to Latin that she has previously displayed in normal lessons. For the duration of the lessons, Izzy was on task from very beginning but had no interaction with other students. She used the CLC textbook, her exercise book and, briefly, her iPad for grammar exercises to

help her meet her targets. These included understanding participles, translating using less vocabulary and producing accurate translations. In a brief conversation before the lesson, Izzy said that she felt the ILM was something different to a teacher but no better or worse. She said that while her teacher focused more on the plot of a story or translating Latin for meaning, the ILM concentrated more on grammar. In her opinion, both should be used to complement each other rather than using one completely instead of the other. In her questionnaire, Izzy identified that she had had set herself three to four targets over the course of the independent learning lessons and had spent between 30-45 minutes on working towards them. It was interesting that despite the accessibility of their iPads and how much students are encouraged to use them in their normal lessons, Izzy did not use it at all to explore the stories in Latin. She did not even use it to help her consolidate her grammar, as her peers did. Izzy felt that the booklet 'was in an order that made sense and helped to cement [her] newfound understanding of topics'. As previously mentioned, Izzy is consistently exacting in the standard of work that she produces. Because she is accustomed to working alone in normal lessons too, she found that the ILM suited her learning style. When interviewed, Izzy stated that she enjoyed the pace at which she was able to work and that she didn't 'have to wait for others or go through things too quickly'. In her opinion it was easy to lose concentration towards the end of the lesson especially as there were too many questions in the ILM. Izzy felt that the teacher could have a more proactive role in lessons 'to help if you were struggling' but during my observations of her work, she did not ask for help with anything she was unsure of.

Group — Timothy, Nate, Teresa and Poppy

In the first lesson, the group worked well together and soon split into pairs (Teresa and Poppy; Timothy and Nate). After some time working on-task, there was more off-topic conversation. Both pairs refocused themselves before long and worked well together both in their pairs as

well as in a group of four. Teresa was leading the on-topic conversation in her pair and Nate in his. All of the students had written a target to meet by the end of the lesson. Teresa, Poppy and Nate had similar targets: to complete a certain number of questions which explored a Latin story in the accompanying textbook. Timothy's target was to understand the story and to take vocabulary from it. On looking through their booklets, I noticed that only Teresa had evaluated her target at the end of the lesson and had identified an area to work on next lesson. The other students had answered their questions correctly but only Nate had managed to meet his target. Over the course of the lessons that followed, the group collectively made a more obvious note of their targets at the start and a review of these at the end of the lessons. The dynamic in the group remained the same as the students split into pairs. They did continue to interact with each other, often conversing about the meaning of a word or discussing the answer to a question.

In their questionnaires, all students (except Nate, whose questionnaire was not handed in) stated that they had set three to four targets each over all of the lessons. They said that they had spent between 30-45 minutes on working towards achieving their targets, which I would agree with from seeing them work and listening to the amount of productive conversation they had. All students used the CLC textbook, the ILM, their iPads, friends and teachers in the lessons, and Poppy included that she had used her exercise book too. When answering the question to do with what they liked about the booklet, the students' answers included that they liked working at their 'own speed and with friends'; not having to 'listen to the teacher the whole [time]'; always having 'something to do' and always being 'sure of what the task was'. The problems they encountered with the booklet seemed to be generally the same. The students felt that the booklet provided little explanation and they did not always understand the questions. Timothy said that *he could not know if his work was actually correct*. Their sentiments were repeated in their interview, where Nate said that the independent learning was 'good because you could go through at your own pace and set what you wanted to do'; Teresa added that 'there was less

pressure' in independent learning, perhaps implying that she found it difficult to keep up with the pace of the teacher or other students during normal Latin lessons. When asked about their group dynamic and why they had worked that way, Teresa said that they had chosen to work in pairs 'because it's easier and working in small groups helps you concentrate' implying that it is more distracting to work in a group of four because 'Nate is better than me at Latin so he would have got more frustrated'. The students generally agreed that they formed their targets by going through the book and 'if [they] didn't want to work on that particular bit [they would] do something else'. The students expressed that they would like the teacher to be involved in the lesson in some way so that students remained on task. The girls did not like the idea of the teacher coming round to review their targets with them and felt that it would be more useful if they reviewed each other's targets; Poppy felt that this was necessary because 'a teacher might not understand that you've done something to the best of your ability, not theirs'. They felt that it would have been useful had I marked their booklets in between lessons but they said that they would have liked teacher input 'every few lessons or every other lesson' and were not entirely comfortable with the idea of learning without a teacher for an extended period of time. The students used their iPads to either read the Latin story using the explorer tool on the CSCP website or to practise grammar and vocabulary exercises. This suggests that they are actively employing a skill that independent learners should have: to use appropriate websites and apps in order to carry out a task.

1) Do school-age students learn effectively using an independent learning approach?

Where students chose to work on their own tasks, either to improve vocabulary or grammar, I observed that they did so very effectively. They were able to select appropriate materials with which to tackle a problem and set themselves targets to achieve by the end of the lesson. Over the course of the four lessons, I noticed when I was looking through their booklets that more of the students were coming closer to reaching their targets. From this angle, independent learning could be viewed as a success. Students were able to identify an

area that they needed to work on, select the relevant resources to investigate a solution, express what their outcome should be, reflect on their learning, and rethink the area they had flagged to work on in the first instance.

How well do students set their own targets and evaluate their progress?

In the first instance, most of the students were constructing simple targets, such as to reach a certain number of questions in the booklet. Their evaluations at the end of the early lessons read along the lines of 'I reached my target' or 'I finished the questions'. Perhaps this was because they were new to the idea of target setting and self-evaluating in this form.

During their interviews at the end of the sequence of lessons, however, some students expressed that having targets could be valuable in promoting their own learning. In particular, they noticed that their concentration levels remained high when they were focusing on something they themselves had identified as a task to work on. Towards the end of the sequence of independent learning lessons, I noticed that some students' evaluations or reviews were more reflective on *what had been learnt* instead of on how much they had completed.

As a result of this, I have realised that *the right sort of target setting* is essential for students to get the most out of independent learning. In future practice I would alter the way in which this target setting was presented to students. The Stripling Model of Inquiry also gives ideas on what to include at each stage of an effective independent learning lesson. Perhaps for younger students, it would be more valuable for them to have a scaffolded way of setting targets as this would help them form the right sort of targets for their area of learning.

What do the students think should be was the role of the teacher in the independent learning lesson?

The interviews at the end of the sequence of independent learning

lessons were very revealing. The students felt that the teacher should have a more proactive role in independent learning lessons, almost as if it were a taught lesson instead.

The primary job that they felt a teacher should do in these lessons was to identify any common errors that students were making in their independent learning and stop the class to explain to everyone. Although this can be difficult to do in a lesson where everyone is doing a different activity, it would be useful from a student's point of view so that they did not continue going about something in the wrong way.

The students were divided on whether a teacher should come round and check the targets they had set themselves at the start of the lesson. While some acknowledged that this would probably help them maintain their concentration, others said that the teacher might not understand that a pupil was working to the best of his or her ability. From this study, I feel that it would be useful for a teacher to go round and check on students' progress not least for the benefit of the students but so that the teacher could get involved in the learning process. This could be as simple as providing verbal feedback and direction towards different resources that students could use to achieve their desired outcomes.

Overall the CLC ILM seems to have been only partly successful at helping students learn independently. The CSCP website says that the ILM is suitable for students who are learning alone, require additional material, are catching up after illness or transfer; are working ahead of the rest of the class, whose teacher is absent or classes with varying ability levels. The ILM presents material meant for students working *solitarily* and not *independently* in the sense that I have come to understand. It did not give the students in my study the opportunity for the sort of autonomy that I had expected. The comprehension questions to the Latin

stories are designed to test students' understanding of the story and their knowledge of grammar but do not direct students to appropriate resources if they are unsure of how to get to an answer.

Conclusion

This research was carried out in order to investigate an alternative teaching method in Latin lessons when working with older students. I wanted to investigate whether these Year 9 students responded well to independent learning in the language sessions of their Latin lessons and I have found that they largely do. All of the students agreed that independent learning allowed them to work at their own pace. For a lot of the students, this meant that there was no pressure to continue the lesson if there was something they had not fully understood; they could address the issue in their own time and access support for it in a range of ways before continuing more confidently. On the other hand, students who work at a faster pace than their peers did not feel as if they were being held back in these independent learning lessons. They could access the rest of the chapter without having to wait for the teacher to set it as extension work. The students expressed some concerns about independent learning in this context. Their main concern was not with the content of the ILM or with the structure of the lessons, but with how many independent learning lessons they received in a short time. Some students felt that it was easier to go off task the longer they continued with independent learning and others were agreed on the opinion that the teacher should play a larger role in these lessons.

I have come to understand that 'independent learning' can be distinct from 'independence in learning', where students are directed to materials that will help them discover and, therefore, learn. Where 'independent learning' connotes a

student working alone with no outside input, I feel that 'independence in learning' better describes what I would like to continue promoting in my teaching career. I think that it is beneficial to students to gain some autonomy for what they study and in what manner. However, I feel that it is necessary to change my role as a teacher in these independent learning lessons so that students gain the most from taking part in them. I would have a more active role during the lesson, I would help students to choose from a selection of targets, and I would check students' progress over the course of the lesson and provide them with verbal feedback. I have come to realise through my earlier research that even the most successful independent learners require some form of direction so that they can achieve their full potential.

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