From Here to Autonomy

A Helsinki University Language Centre Autonomous Learning Project

Yliopistopaino
Helsinki University Press
Foreword

One of the most interesting aspects of learner autonomy is the changing role of the teacher. Autonomy implies a degree of self-awareness in the learner and any teacher who is instrumental in the development of such self-awareness is almost bound to undergo a parallel change in attitudes towards teaching and learning. The term “learner awareness” is already part of the pedagogical vocabulary, but “teacher awareness” has been less frequently discussed. However, the team of teachers at Helsinki University Language Centre who, for various reasons, found themselves involved in the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) project, all profess to have gone through a revealing process of change in terms of their own attitudes towards teaching and learning.

This book, therefore, not only takes the learner as the focus of attention, but also highlights the role of the teacher and the process of interactional change between the two. Our main purpose is to tell the personal stories of student and teacher participants in the ALMS programme. This inevitably involves description of its set-up and organisation, but it is the process, rather than the product, which we are interested in promoting. The product, after all, is specific to this context.

The three teachers who have written the bulk of this book were fortunate enough to receive support from Helsinki University and the Language Centre, which enabled them to concentrate on development, research and writing. We are very grateful for this support.

The project itself would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and plain hard work of the group of Language Centre teachers who have, at various times, been part of the project. We would like to thank all of them and in particular, Kaija Ervola and Diane Pilkinton-Pihko, who were with us from the start and have made important contributions.
It will be clear to readers that we owe a debt of gratitude to friends and colleagues in CRAPEL, at the University of Nancy II, who have been a principle source of inspiration and support. Philip Riley, for whom Finland is almost a second, or third, home, has given us invaluable words of advice and support, and Henri Holec could be said to have lit the flame of interest in autonomous language learning. He also very kindly agreed to contribute to the book.

Finally, we would like to thank all those students who have been willing guinea pigs in the project. When the teachers’ faith has sometimes been shaky, it has been the students who have restored it by their incredible readiness and enthusiasm. A special mention goes to Nina, Hanna, Heikki, Ina and Juha, whose story is told in one of the case studies in Chapter Four. We hope that these students, who are potential future school teachers, will continue to practise autonomy in and out of the classroom, as successfully as they did during their ALMS module.

Leena Karlsson, Felicity Kjisik, Joan Nordlund
Heisinki
Introduction

The concept of autonomy is being used more and more frequently by language teachers with reference to the learner or to the learning process, and at the same time innovative classroom practices which aim to explore this notion are being increasingly experimented with.

For some of the language teachers in question, the concept of learner autonomy or autonomous learning is above all a question of independence, whether of the learner, who is solely in charge of his or her learning, or of the learning itself, since it is no longer directed by a teacher, but self-directed by the learner. Consequently, the new role which these teachers assume (unless, that is, they decide that any kind of teacher-intervention is simply pointless) involves creating pedagogical situations where learners, working alone or in small groups, can direct their learning themselves. This has led to the establishment, in various institutions, of ‘autonomous learning’ schemes, whose degree of independence varies considerably, though, (hence the expression ‘semi-autonomy’) since it depends on just how capable the learners actually are of taking control.

For other teachers, the idea of autonomy is related to that of the capacity for action, which in this case means the ability to learn other than by following a course. For these teachers, the aim of any teacher intervention will be to help learners to acquire the capacity to self-direct their learning, so that they can learn efficiently, personally and independently if they so wish. The teacher’s role in this case is to train learners to carry out the various tasks involved in self-directed learning.

The team of teachers whose experimental work is described in this book belong to this second school of thought, and the self-directed learning programme in question is one whose basic aim is learning to learn. This is its first original feature.
Its second original feature is that this programme brings together in a totally integrated way learning to learn and learning a language. The knowledge and skills necessary for learning are acquired by exploiting the language learning situation in which the students find themselves, so that they can discover and immediately put into practice, say, what understanding a language involves and how to acquire the relevant skills.

The third original feature of this programme is that the methodological resources provided by collective independent study - taking the form, in this case, of six hours' integrated individual training with a counsellor who is available throughout the language-learning programme - are exploited in such a way as to help the students with the progressive acquisition of learning skills.

This experiment illustrates in an exemplary fashion one of the many ways in which autonomy can be introduced into a teaching/learning situation from which it was previously absent, on the basis of a coherent set of methodological choices.

A further innovation is that this report shows us the human side of a project of this kind. The floor is constantly being given, directly or indirectly, to the actors themselves, the teachers and learners concerned, and it is their subjective world which provides the stage on which the objective events and observations reported here are acted out, and which makes them meaningful. For Felicity Kjøsik, Joan Nordlund, Leena Karlsson and Diane Pilkington-Pihko (the order is that in which they appear in the book) it is clearly this human side which deserves the fullest attention: the degree of learner-centredness implied in the choice ‘Autonomy = capacity to learn’, and the degree of personal commitment required from the teacher who tries to put this choice into practice, fully justifies treating learners and teachers as beings endowed with a psychological life and who are members of society, and clearly demonstrates the absurdity of trying to reduce the educational process to a mechanical series of stimuli and responses, causes and effects. This being the case, what would be the use of limiting the discussion to only the material aspects of the experiment? All those language teachers who are considering a similar project will be grateful to the ALMS team for deciding to share their experience and not just their experiment with them, because both are equally important.

Here, then, is a book which thoroughly deserves to be given pride of place in the growing body of practical and theoretical work on the concept of autonomy. And the many lessons which can be learnt from the experiment it describes will serve as an encouragement to those for whom ‘autonomy’ is still a somewhat risky enterprise.

Henri Holec
C.R.A.P.E.L.
Université de Nancy 2
January 1997
CHAPTER ONE
The Journey
Felicity Kjisik

The title of this book “From Here to Autonomy” is more than just an amusing reference to a classic book. It is also intended to stand as a metaphor for the experiences of one group of teachers over several years. This could not be a book which simply described a project as if it were an off-the-cuff product, because the teachers involved felt that it was a process of personal development and historical coincidences. There were no startling revelations along the way – although there were certainly some personal moments of discovery. One of the core elements of autonomy – reflection and self-awareness – which we have set out to encourage in the students is also a necessary prerequisite for the teachers involved. This is why we have felt it worthwhile to tell our story from a very personal perspective as we feel sure that many other teachers will recognise themselves and their own experiences. Finally, it is important to add that, like with many experiential journeys, there is no actual journey’s end. This book simply sets out to explain where we have come from and where we are now.

Not only is there no journey’s end, it is also impossible to pinpoint the beginning of the journey. As many writers have pointed out, the concept of autonomy is not a new one. The ancient Greeks used the concept in a political sense and Herbert Pierson (1996) has reminded us that ancient Chinese writers, including Confucius, believed in values that we can now see as autonomous learning. Nevertheless, in contemporary times, it has been in the years since the Second World War that the ideas of autonomy have gradually become part of educational theory and practice. Gremmo and Riley (1995) list some of the movements and trends which have contributed towards this process.

They refer to the growth of minority rights movements; the reaction against behaviourism and the coming of “alternative” psychologies, which in turn were manifested in learner-centred and communicative approaches to language learning; the influence of the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project; the developments in technology; the huge increase in demand for foreign languages; the commercialisation of language provision; and the massive increase in school and university population. It is therefore of no surprise that current language teachers, who have grown up in this turbulent period, should reflect these changes in their own lives and work.

Let us now return to the context of this book and the teachers who are represented in it.

The environment

Finland is no stranger to the issues and politics of languages. The question of the Finnish language itself played a major part in the struggle for independence and the search for a national identity at the turn of the century. The position of Swedish as the equal official language of the country, though spoken by a small minority, continues to be a controversial issue in daily politics and education. The ever-encroaching growth of English as an omnipresent language is another sensitive and topical issue. There is also a huge demand for foreign languages as a result of the inevitable move towards internationalisation at cultural, economic and educational levels. All this has meant that languages play a large part in the school curriculum and, in higher education, that language study is generally a compulsory element of degree programmes.

The Language Centre of Helsinki University is about to celebrate its twentieth anniversary. Twenty years ago there were very few countries in the world where institutions were set up to serve the language needs of a university, separate from the traditional philology departments. Once it had been decided that Finnish university students should all study at least two languages (one of them being the second national
language), it was inevitable that the philology departments could not supply the need and that a more specialised institution was necessary. Hence, all Finnish universities have a Language Centre. It is a unique department in that it serves the entire student population, rather than just a specialised group of its own. Helsinki University Language Centre is the largest of its kind in Finland, employing over a hundred teachers. About one half of these teachers teach English or Swedish and the rest cover another thirteen languages. The student body includes the 20,000 of Helsinki University plus those of affiliated institutions such as the University of Art and Design, the Theatre Academy and the Sibelius Academy.

Over the years a considerable body of experience in the teaching of English as a foreign language has accumulated. Most of the teachers are highly qualified and, as part of the academic community, have kept in touch with current educational ideas. Some have taken up post-graduate studies in the UK and the US, and there has been continuous, specialised inservice training within Finland. One example was a large-scale national programme for all language centre teachers called PILC, the Programme of In-service Training for Language Centre Teachers, a series of one-week workshops and study periods lasting one year (1987–89). Study areas included methodology, language testing, discourse analysis, lexis, CALL, materials preparation and psycholinguistics. This was run by The Language Centre For Finnish Universities in cooperation with Birmingham University and was sponsored by the British Council. A follow-up programme to this was SILC, which was a series of study modules, usually of one or two term’s duration, on a variety of topics such as cross-cultural communication and independent learning. On a smaller scale, the English teachers have organised national workshops annually, usually with one or two visiting luminaries, covering a wide range of topical issues in language teaching. On an individual level, teachers can get financial assistance to attend conferences, usually on the condition that one is giving a paper or presentation. This also both encourages and rewards those who are interested in development.

What this has meant is that we, and by “we” I now mean those teachers who have been involved in the autonomous learning project from the start, have been continuously exposed to current ideas at the same time as carrying on our daily routine as language teachers. When looking for explanations for change, it is often difficult to say whether one is developing one’s own pedagogical ideas as a result of trial and experience in the classroom, or whether it is the exposure to ideas through books, journals, lectures and discussions with colleagues. Naturally, the two go hand in hand. What is clear is that all teachers go through a process of development – learning, we could call it – influenced by the environment and their own responses to it. Donald Freeman has pointed out the importance of teachers’ knowledge, accumulated over years of experience in the classroom. He writes “Teachers' knowledge and understandings develop through time with an internal, lived coherence. This knowledge is also built on interpersonal relationships; it is individually constructed within a network of social experiences” (1996). The personal “stories” or narratives that teachers tell, such as the ones in this book, he considers to result in valuable research findings because “they have the potential to render what teachers know in ways that are useful, acceptable, and valid for the knowers: teachers, those learning to teach, and those who seek to better understand teaching and learning” (ibid.).

The freedom we are fortunately offered in the academic environment of the Language Centre presents few obstacles to teacher development. We are relatively free to plan and develop our own courses within, of course, the limitations set by the institutional context. At this point I will digress a little in order to describe our particular context as this has a direct bearing on the development of the autonomous programme.

The Faculties of Helsinki University set the language requirements of their students. These requirements are usually stated in terms of credits or “study weeks”. The students are firstly required to study their second domestic or national language, be it Finnish or Swedish. Under Finnish law all civil servants are asked to give evidence of proficiency in their second nation-
English academic texts. The emphasis is on reading for content and reacting to it, and the tasks and projects carried out are subject-related.

As for the content of the oral skills courses, most teachers are well-versed in language teaching methodology and would at least profess to run a communicative classroom. Evaluation is usually carried out through continuous assessment and the satisfactory completion of a certain set of tasks. Teachers are informally attached to one or more Faculties so that they may concentrate on the special needs of those students. As with the reading comprehension courses, the emphasis is on English for Specific Purposes and most teachers, for example, say that their aim is to activate the often passive knowledge of the students. At least until recently, school teaching in Finland has been fairly traditional, grammar-based and teacher-centred. Oral testing is not yet a compulsory part of the national school matriculation examination. There has been little scope for independent work in the school classroom although this is now, as it is in so many other parts of Europe, strongly recommended by the National Board of Education.

This is the context that I and my colleagues have found ourselves in for the past ten years or so. Outwardly there may not have been a great deal of change, but in the endless discussions about our autonomy project it has become clear that there has been an inward change that has led us to the conclusion that a totally new starting point was called for. From a personal point of view, in retrospect, certain encounters and experiences can be highlighted.

One teacher's story

David Nunan (1996) talks of the shock of discovering, as a young teacher, that his learners did not necessarily learn what he had taught them. He became aware of the "complex and indirect relationship between instruction and learning". Possibly most teachers, if they are willing to admit it, go through this discovery. I, too, had come to realise that the best I could do
was find ways which would help students do their own learning. I was trying to develop curricula in which the major decisions were made in reference to the learner – in other words, learner-centredness.

In 1991 I embarked on a part-time Masters degree in the Teaching of English as a Second Language which was run by London University Institute of Education in cooperation with the Mediterranean Summer Institute of ESADE (Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas) in Barcelona. This, naturally, afforded me more opportunity to concentrate on current issues and, through the course location in ESADE, Barcelona, to get a first-hand look at an operating self-access centre. Lew Barnett and Geoff Jordan had already been operating a busy, if small, self-access centre and they were in the process of planning a state-of-the-art centre in the new premises, currently under construction. Much of the discussion at this point seemed to focus on the layout, the materials and the organisation of the centre and less on the role of the student, not to mention the teacher, in the whole idea.

That autumn we had the good fortune and good judgement to invite Henri Holec to Turku, in South West Finland, to lead our annual workshop for Language Centre teachers. This year the theme was “The Learner” and Holec spoke eloquently on his favourite theme of autonomy – “the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (1981). He took us through the stages and decisions involved in all aspects of learning, i.e. “- determining the objectives; defining the contents and the progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition . . . (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired.” (ibid.), and he asked us to consider who was taking the responsibility for these decisions and processes.

He set off, in me at least, a process of reflection and re-thinking of the roles of students and teachers, which continued throughout my MA studies. I began to feel uncomfortable with the assumption that the teacher knows what is going on in the learners' heads, and therefore what is best for them. Much of the existing research on learner behaviour and learner talk draws its conclusions from the surface behaviour or interlanguage of the student. Taxonomies of learners' communicative strategies, for example, were generally based on analysis of transcripts with little regard for context, personal styles or schemata. They seemed to me to be atomistic, product-based and representing the views of the analyst rather than the learner. In the research for my master's thesis (1993) I attempted to go a little further by using retrospective protocols. The learners first performed mini-dialogues which were video-recorded. Immediately afterwards they watched the video of their performance and simultaneously freely introspected about the mental processes that had been going on during the dialogues. They were also asked specific questions about their planning, their attention to grammar and accuracy and the cultural or personal difficulty of the task. Detailed transcripts were made of both the videos and protocols. This approach brought to light many facets of the mental processes which were impossible to infer from the product alone. Self-monitoring, retrieval of lexis, sounding "natural" and awareness of the complex pragmatics of the situations all appeared in the protocol transcripts. The data showed how a seemingly simple task can lead to the student playing a multiplicity of roles. Teachers need to be more aware of the consequences and nature of the tasks they set.

Reading Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences also spurred me to look again at the kind of learning situations we were setting up for our students. Gardner distinguishes seven different intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. It seemed that most existing language classrooms were emphasising some of these intelligences more than others. Little emphasis had so far been placed on either the ability to understand and cooperate with others or the capacity to reflect on one's own self and behaviour.

Ideas began to form on how the theories of autonomy could be translated into the Language Centre. In the summer of '92 a course in ESADE on the Setting up and Running of a Self Access Centre further confused me. It was clear that such centres were rapidly being set up round the world, often being
seen by universities and governments alike as a new, modern way of dealing with huge increases in the number of students. It was also obvious that there was a lot of resistance from language teachers. They saw, quite rightly in many cases, self-access centres as merely a way of cutting costs by making the teacher’s role redundant. They were often seen as just another high-tech language lab that would remain empty and ineffective. Teachers would simply, in the future, be required to write self-study materials, preferably computerised. Indeed this is still the view of many teachers when they hear talk of autonomous language learning.

Possibly to reassure and convince myself as much as others, I wrote a paper on the changing role of the teacher in “self access language learning”. Here the role of the self-access centre itself became a minor one, compared to the role of the teacher as a learner-trainer (I later came to dislike the implications of this term), counsellor (or whatever label this role is given), materials organiser and teacher trainer. This view was reinforced in the autumn of 1992 when a group of us visited CRAPEL in Nancy, France. The decidedly low-tech self access centre (since upgraded) was only a small part of an extensive support or “learning-to-learn” scheme for learners. Furthermore, the enthusiastic team of teachers were actively doing research in the areas of learner training and learning styles. Whilst there was a clear change in the role of the teacher (and of the student for that matter), there seemed no fear of redundancy here.

We began to formulate ideas for the development of autonomous learning at the Language Centre in Helsinki. Two more issues spurred us on. As already mentioned, the attitude of the authorities towards what is called “self-study” has been more guided by economic than pedagogical motives. Finland has been no exception. The deep recession that the country fell into at the end of the eighties meant, amongst other things, sudden and enormous cuts in university budgets. We were urged to find ways to accommodate these cuts and “self-study” seemed to be the magical answer. I found myself on a Language Centre committee set up to develop such courses which would include savings in teacher-contact hours, thereby saving money.

Indeed, this is clearly one reason why our project has been favourably looked upon and supported by the administration. This is not to say that there has been no support for its pedagogical motives as well. Experimental approaches in university teaching are being encouraged, in particular those which promote independent thought and study in the students.

Secondly, during the academic year 93/94, Helsinki Language Centre was also involved in running a national in-service training (SILC) module for Language Centre teachers on “self access”, in cooperation with Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration. Part of the advance publicity can be seen below.

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**THE AUTONOMOUS LEARNER**

**SELF-ACCESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING**


How do we help our students to become autonomous learners? How do we encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning? How can we take advantage of new technology in the students’ self-study? How can we avoid the ordinary organisational problems of self-access? What are the experiences of other teachers in this field?

These are the types of questions which the next SILC module will be trying to find answers for with the help of experts from home and abroad.

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE MODULE**

* A preliminary seminar (3 days) which will consist of lectures and group work. The seminar will be led by Henri Holec and Lew Barnett.
  * Project work
  * A final seminar (2 days) consisting of demonstrations, presentations and discussion. This seminar will be led by experts in Finland and the seminar participants.

**THE AIMS AND CONTENT OF THE MODULE**

The main aim of this module is to encourage teachers to experiment with self-study in their own teaching. The seminar parts of the module will include lectures and demonstrations concerning the principles of autonomous learning and its implications in practice. The group or pair work which will take place between the seminars could be, for example, the preparation of self-access materials.
ALMS MODULE (ALMS) FRAMEWORK. Student contact hours with Counsellor (above the thick horizontal line) and Faculty teacher (below the line)

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F.L.T. = Faculty Language Teacher  A.C. = ALMS Counsellor  h = academic hour

Humanities 1-term, 2 credit course (student time: approx. 80hrs) 12 students
Teacher contact time: 60 hrs

FIGURE 1. One model of autonomous language learning
group and individual) during the term. The other teacher (F.L.T.), whose contact hours are shown below the horizontal line in the model, would have institutional responsibility such as giving credits and would give advice concerning the special materials of the students’ subject area. Various support groups would be set up according to the wishes and objectives set by the students themselves. The diagram shows some examples of these support groups (reading, oral, writing and presentation skills) but the number and nature of these support groups would vary each term. The support groups would have a varying amount of teacher contact/input which would provide a framework for the students’ own group and individual projects. The two teachers would have an average total of about 60 contact hours with the students which would represent a real saving of a quarter of the normal contact hours in a “regular” course.

This model became the foundation for our autonomous language learning programme. In Autumn 1994 the ALMS project started with four groups, totalling about 90 students from the faculties of Humanities, Social Sciences, Education and the University of Art and Design. Information sessions were held before term began and students were able to choose between the regular English courses and ALMS. The students from the different faculties are combined in the various support groups although many students do form their own subject-area groups for discussion and project work. The current set-up will be described in more detail in Chapter 2.

We are now in the third year of the programme and the student numbers have grown to about 160 per term. This year we are also organising workshops for teachers of other languages who are interested in adapting the system for their own students. There is clearly a growing interest in this type of learning/teaching throughout Finland and the interest is now being converted into action.

Principles adhered to along the way

One of the first questions asked about our programme concerned the name. Why autonomy? Why not self-study, or self-instruction, or self-access learning, or self-directed learning? The best answer to this is to again refer back to the definition of autonomy of Henri Holec: “Learner autonomy is when the learner is willing and capable of taking charge of his/her own learning” (1981). It is thus a capacity which has to be acquired, whereas self-directed learning is a way in which learning is carried out. Similarly the other terms mentioned above describe systems or ways of organising learning. They may be more or less teacher-led. Self-study and self-instruction refer to the absence of a teacher but tell us little about the degree of (possibly indirect) teacher control. Self-access refers more to the organisation of materials which have been set out in such a way that they are expected to help the learner. As a team of teachers we were more interested in Holec’s idea of helping our students “learn to learn” rather than spend a lot of solitary time preparing self-study materials. We instinctively felt that, no matter how well prepared the self-study materials in a super, high-tech self-access system may be, we would still be back in the old familiar place we were trying to escape from. There would still be no guarantee that students would learn. Perhaps this scepticism about materials and technology could be traced back to earlier visits to Estonia, a short way across the Baltic. In 1990 we had held our annual English teachers workshop in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. This was still in the days before that country achieved its independence (although change was certainly in the air). We could see for ourselves the total dearth of materials and equipment, so we were astonished at the level of English of many of the colleagues that we met there. They were living proof that given the will and the capacity, a person will find a way to learn. Thus we feel that “autonomy” best expresses the intentions behind our approach.
However, while the name of the programme has been a common talking point, it is only a minor issue amongst those we have endlessly mulled over. Partly because of our own uncertainties in developing an experimental system and partly because of the frequent challenges we have received from many quarters, we have come to formulate certain principles which we have tried to adhere to in the programme. These principles relate to certain aspects of autonomy that recur in the literature or in discussions in the field. I would like to present ten such aspects of autonomy and show how we attempt to deal with them in the ALMS programme.

1. Autonomy is a capacity that has to be learned

If we accept Holec’s view that language learning autonomy is not innate then it leaves scope for the development of a system and techniques which may help the learners learn how to learn. Indeed, in recent years we have seen the emergence of the field of learner “training”. Learner development or learner awareness may be more suitable terms to describe the process which the learner undergoes when learning to learn. In planning our programme we took Ellis and Sinclair’s definition (1989): “Learner training aims to help learners consider the factors which affect their learning and discover the learning strategies which suit them best, so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning.” It was important to us that our students knew from the start what the philosophy of the new programme was and how we saw the new roles of teacher and student. We thus decided on an intensive opening session of six hours devoted to raising their awareness of learning strategies, learning styles, issues of responsibility and decision-making (See Ch. 2). In terms of explicit training of learning strategies we take a cautious approach. Understanding the process of learning has been considerably advanced by the research on learning strategies and styles. However, we feel there are dangers in trying to make students use particular strategies. Steven McDonough (1995) describes the dilemma well: “First, it is not clear that what differentiates good and poor learners is the choice of strategy; it may simply be the range and amount of use of strategies. Second, there are constraints on when a strategy works which are to do with individuals, possibly cultural background, type of problem and proficiency level. Third, a pedagogic decision of some risk has to be taken to devote teaching time to strategy training rather than language learning, and the pay-off is not secure.” We feel, therefore, at this point, that it is justified to help students become aware of their own and other approaches. We also encourage them to use their own (long) experience of language learning and, indeed, their own exposure to language teaching. Above all, we hope they will start to trust their own abilities to analyse problems, set objectives, make plans and finally evaluate themselves. The corollary of this, of course, is that the teachers involved also have to learn to trust the students and this has frequently shown itself to be an even harder task.

2. The road to autonomy is a process

Observers have sometimes been surprised at the amount of support and contact we have with our students who are “supposed to be autonomous”. We point out that few students come to us who do not need any help. The majority have not been accustomed to this level of autonomy in education and the change is a process that needs help and encouragement. One of our main intentions is to present our students with (what may be) a totally new way of looking at things and the process of adaptation is not always easy. We do not even pretend that our students are autonomous when they leave us – after all a term is a very short time – but at least they are now aware of the option. Other “self-study” systems may profess to make much greater savings in terms of teacher time but we feel that the high failure rates which often occur in such systems can be attributed to the lack of support in a difficult process.
3. The state of autonomy is essentially unstable

The degree of autonomy in an individual varies according to a number of factors such as the type of task involved, their personal attitudes and motivation, their mood, their history, their reaction to the particular situation. Students must be allowed the freedom to choose their level of dependence. Similarly there may be external restraints on the level of autonomy attainable. We have had to be aware of our particular institutional context such as time limits, group size, credit systems and so on. However, we also believe that there should be no situation where some degree of autonomy cannot be achieved, and that we can all work within those limitations. No system will be transferable as such to another context but teachers should be able to develop an approach which fits.

4. Autonomy inevitably involves change in power relationships

Any changes in terms of responsibility or decision making are directly concerned with the power relationships in the classroom. Students in traditional educational settings have been used to a very unbalanced power relationship as they have had little say in what, how, when or even why they learn. (Of course, ultimately, as we know, it is the learner’s choice, conscious or otherwise, whether or not to learn at all.) Assessment has generally been entirely out of their hands. In an autonomous setting both teachers and students have to come to terms with a new relationship and this may cause difficulties. Nevertheless, it is important to state that the teachers do not absolve themselves of all responsibility - we are ultimately responsible for providing the best we can for our students.

We should also be aware of the wider political aspects of autonomy. As was already mentioned in the third aspect, we are always working within a larger structure, be it the university or the society we live in, and there is only a certain amount of power that can be handed over to the students. In some societies the implications of power exchange may be much greater.

5. Autonomy requires supportive structures, both internal and external

In the pursuit of autonomy teachers can only provide circumstances, frameworks and structures which will encourage students to take control of their learning. We see these structures as both external and internal. By offering learner awareness sessions and counselling services, and by setting up support groups and networks, we are providing an external framework which will hopefully lead to the development of internal structures in the mental processes of the students. Indeed, the proximity of a good self-access centre with a full range of materials and technology is also a useful part of the support system. After all, we are intending to empower the students with this capacity for learning for life, not just for the extent of the course.

6. Autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process

David Little (1996) describes an interesting model of language learning proposed by Legenhausen and Wolff (Eck et al. 1994) in which the learner is seen as a communicator (developing communication skills), an experimenter/researcher (developing an awareness of language) and an intentional learner (developing an awareness of language learning). This implies that maximum language skills can only be attained if the learners develop language-learning awareness so that they can make use of all opportunities to learn, both in the classroom and out. Hence, we need a pedagogy that includes continuous reflection. In the ALMS programme we try to encourage this through the use of counselling sessions and log or journal writing. Students are expected to evaluate their own progress and to be able to explain the basis of their evaluation.

7. Autonomy has both individual and social aspects

Autonomy is often taken, mistakenly we believe, to be a solitary condition. However, more and more writers are stress-
ing the need for interaction and negotiation in the development of autonomy. Leni Dam, for example, stresses a social dimension: "Learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person" (1995) (my italics).

In the ALMS programme we encourage students to form groups and networks and to use peer evaluation. They discuss happily together (even without the teacher), they write to and for each other, they exchange and share academic texts and they even listen together. We believe this is one of the main reasons for the apparent success of the programme.

8. Autonomy is not limited to the classroom

An important part of language-learning awareness is the admission that a lot of language learning goes on outside the classroom and that this is seen as a positive thing. Students are frequently initially surprised when we stress the importance of making use of the outside world during the ALMS module. Not only do we encourage the use of English in the environment (and there is plenty of English in the Finnish environment), but we also urge them to integrate their ALMS projects with the rest of their studies. We find this increases motivation and develops their conscious awareness of language learning. Taking full advantage of the environment forms part of the external support structure that was described in aspect 5.

9. Autonomy has to be adapted to different cultural contexts

There has been considerable debate over whether autonomy is just another western concept that is being forced on cultures that do not share the same values. However there have been autonomous systems apparently successfully applied and adopted in a wide range of cultures, which indicates that the problem may be more a misunderstanding about the deep values of different societies. Individual differences in learning styles, for instance, may be more important than learning strategies that have been acquired in a different classroom culture. We have seen that in Finland the traditional classroom has not allowed much room for autonomy, and yet the students in the ALMS programme have experienced surprisingly little difficulty in adapting to a new culture. Studies have indicated that the Finnish society as a whole places high value on the concepts of intellectual autonomy, responsibility and freedom. This could explain why students in the ALMS programme have felt comfortable in the new context and expressed a wish that the same system would spread to their other studies.

10. Autonomy is closely related to social identity

Autonomy is not simply a method of language learning, but has much deeper implications for the identity of the individual. Holec (1981) has written that learner autonomy "develops the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives". David Little (1996) has more recently said that "relative to schooling in general, the autonomous learner is the one whose learning gradually enlarges his or her sense of identity; relative to second language learning in particular, the autonomous learner is the one for whom the target language gradually becomes an integral part of what he or she is". These views have been reinforced by some of our students who have reported that their ALMS experience has affected their attitude to studying and even to life in general. Teachers involved in the programme have also reported changes in their attitudes and behaviour elsewhere (See Ch. 4).

Finally, before we move on to a detailed description of the ALMS module in the next chapter, I would like to respond to the most frequent question we get asked which is: "Yes, that's all very well, but does it work?"

It has recently been said that all learning, by its nature, is autonomous. If we take this as so, it implies that if we can develop autonomy in our learners we are going to enhance
their learning. There is already evidence that the processes we have been describing, such as involving students in decision making, raising language-learning awareness, do enhance autonomy. Dam and Gabrielsen have carried out interesting research in Denmark and found that school-children are capable of and keen on involvement in classroom procedures. Positive findings are also coming out of Leni Dam and Leinhard Legenhausen’s research comparing children in autonomous settings with children in more traditional “communicative” classrooms.

Research on our own programme is still at an early stage. A pilot study described in Chapter Four indicates that there have been improvements in motivation and heightened consciousness of the learning process. The case studies described in Chapter Five also reveal a readiness to reflect on learning, and to take control and responsibility for learning. These, we feel, are all positive answers to the initial question. Testing tools are difficult to develop in such a system. A test which might suit another system, with different teaching methods and proficiency criteria, would not apply to our system and vice versa.

Edith Esch has listed five criteria which she considers important in autonomy support systems, be they human resources or materials provision. The ALMS programme at least attempts to satisfy these criteria. They are, firstly, the provision of choice in, for example, the medium used, the materials, the tasks and, secondly, flexibility in the system. Can decisions be or changed or reversed? The third criterion is whether the system is adaptable and the materials modifiable in order to suit the different styles and strategies of the individual learners. The fourth criterion is reflectivity. Are the learners offered the opportunity the review and evaluate their own progress? This necessarily involves some degree of learner training to develop the learners’ capacity for this kind of introspection. Finally, she includes the criterion of shareability, by which she means the opportunity for students to socially interact and collaborate.

In conclusion I would like to borrow Edith Esch’s (1996) analogy of language learning with bridge building, as it fits in rather aptly with our metaphor of the road to autonomy. She points out that you can build a bridge in a number of ways. Firstly, you may try alone, experimenting on the design and the materials, until you finally succeed, having learnt a lot about yourself in the process. Secondly, you may work with friends on the project. This will call for negotiation but you will probably have more fun this way. Thirdly, you might decide to work with others but start from opposite sides of the river until you meet in the middle. Finally, you can “reflect on your experience of bridge building and, with the assistance of an engineer, turn your learning experience into conceptualized knowledge representations as you are learning”. This applies as well to language learners as it does to teachers involved in creating new cultures with their students. The team of teachers working in the ALMS project have been aware of their own knowledge representations changing since the early days of apprehensive discussion about “self access”. One of the happy side-effects of trying to develop autonomy in the learner has been the feeling of personal development in most of the teachers involved.
CHAPTER TWO

The ALMS programme

Felicity Kjisik

This chapter will describe in some detail the main features of the ALMS programme. It is not our view that there is one system of autonomous learning that is applicable everywhere. There are many elements in every context which will affect the way autonomy can be implemented, but we feel it may be useful to describe one particular framework. The main features may be transferable to other contexts, but the specific content and details would undoubtedly require adaptation.

The main features of the ALMS programme can be grouped under five headings which form the backbone of the system:

A. Learner awareness
B. Contracts/projects
C. Support groups/workshops
D. Counselling
E. Record-keeping and evaluation

These are described in the chronological order that they emerge in the programme, although they are interrelated and overlapping, both in terms of content and time.

A. Learner awareness

A student completes an Autonomous Learning Module in one university term of thirteen weeks in order to gain 1-4 credits towards his or her degree. The first two weeks of this period are spent on introducing the new system to the students and helping them gradually understand what we are trying to achieve and what we mean by autonomy. By the end of the two weeks they will have set their own learning objectives and made preliminary plans on how to achieve them.

The principle awareness, or orientation, session takes place in a compulsory 6-hour meeting covering the following areas:

1. Reflections about language learning
2. Consciousness-raising of language learning strategies
3. Analysis of students' own strategies
4. Analysis of language needs, present and future
5. The students' own objectives
6. Making preliminary plans and thinking about areas of interest

The session is led by an "ALMS Counsellor". This is a teacher who ensures that the students understand the basic principles behind the ALMS programme. In addition to running the first session, the ALMS Counsellor also holds the first individual counselling session with the students from that session, is available for consultation as required during the term and also holds the final group session which centres on evaluating the programme. (There will be more about counselling later in this chapter).

1. Reflections about language learning

First, the ALMS Counsellor briefly introduces the idea of autonomy. Most students have been used to teacher-centred methods throughout their learning lives, and the idea of being able to plan and carry out their own programme is a novel one. In addition, they have come to this module with their own expectations about what it means. When we began this system there were often students who expected that we would set them work which they would go off and do in their own time; in other words, their idea of "self-study". As the programme has become better known amongst the students and as the pre-information has been more effective, their expectations have been closer to reality.

We begin the process by asking them to think about themselves as language learners. In small groups they discuss their own history of language learning. We point out that although they may not consider themselves experts on language learn-
ing they should at least consider themselves to be experts on language teaching. After all, most of them have been exposed to nine or ten years of teaching of English, including several more years of two or more other languages. It is our experience that Finnish students are eager to talk about their language learning experience, be it positive or negative. Most have strong feelings on the subject and welcome the opportunity to be listened to. In order to help them focus their ideas, we give them a short questionnaire to complete. We have found, for example, that a simple questionnaire like the one presented by Gail Ellis and Barbara Sinclair in their book “Learning to Learn English” works successfully (see Fig. 1).

2. Consciousness-raising of language learning strategies

In the second stage the aim is for the students to become more aware of what is happening when they are communicating in English. At this point we avoid using any special terms like “strategies” as this might influence their normal behaviour when performing the task we set them. We explain that the best way for them to recall what they do whilst communicating in English is to reflect, during and immediately after the act itself.

We begin by distributing a number of articles which we have copied from newspapers or journals. For a group of 24 students we would use five different articles, shared out as evenly as possible. The students work in pairs and we ensure that each pair has two different articles. Then we give the students the following instructions:

Work in pairs. Take a newspaper clipping different from your partner’s. Read the clipping. Make notes. Memorise the main points. Explain the contents of the article to your partner. Your partner will then report the contents to the class. (There will be others who have read the same article) Whilst you are doing this task think about and discuss the following questions:
- How do you make sense of the article?
- How do you memorise things?
- How do you overcome difficulties in comprehension?
- How do you feel when learning or using English?
- How do you use/help your partner?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Try the following quiz. Tick (✓) your answers to the questions.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Did/do you get good results in grammar tests?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you have a good memory for new words?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you hate making mistakes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. In class, do you get irritated if mistakes are not corrected?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is your pronunciation better when you read aloud than when you have a conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do you wish you had more time to think before speaking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Did/do you enjoy being in a class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you find it difficult to pick up more than two or three words of a new language when you are on holiday abroad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you like to learn new grammar rules, words, etc. by heart?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How to calculate your score:
Score: 3 points for each Usually
    2 points for each Sometimes
    1 point for each Almost never or never
    0 points for each Don’t know

Total score: 

Now read the appropriate comments on page 38.

FIGURE 1A. Ellis and Sinclair questionnaire and analysis (1989)
It can be seen that the task involves a variety of skills. First the students are asked to read and make sense of their article. They are expected to pick out the main points, summarise it and report it verbally to their partner. They also listen to their partner’s report of the other article, discuss it, ask questions and, finally, prepare to report that back to the whole class. They may use any method they like to complete the task. The intention is that they should try to find ways of overcoming comprehension difficulties, without using the most obvious ones of asking the teacher or using a dictionary. The articles have been chosen fairly carefully in order to bring up certain issues or problems. One article may have a very specific topic which may cause difficulties for some students. For example, we have used an article concerning the development of computer chess games. Another article, taken from an academic journal, is a short report of some research done on Finnish exchange students in English universities. Since reading research reports is a familiar task for most university students, this text causes relatively few problems. A third text used is a longish newspaper article which contains several very loosely connected pieces of information. The main thread is very hard to find and there is quite a lot of unusual vocabulary.

After about half an hour of working with their partners the students then give their reports to the whole group. This moves fairly quickly and is made easier by the fact that several people are relating the same article so that between them they usually manage to fully describe the whole article.

The main purpose of the exercise comes next. The students give their responses to the questions they were asked to think about during completion of the task. The teacher, meanwhile, writes whatever they say on an overhead transparency. Quickly the transparency fills up with comments like:

“We asked questions.”
“We discussed what this word could mean.”
“I guessed.”
“I used my own knowledge of the subject.”
“My partner knew about computers.”
“I noted the main points.”
“I made a mind map.”
using the "right" ones, but rather to raise their awareness and help them analyse their own behaviour. We encourage them to feel good about strategies that they may have previously thought to be "cheating" or "feeble", such as guessing or asking for help. Often such strategies have been frowned upon in the traditional school setting but we point out that in authentic situations we often use them to succeed in communicating. We point out the importance of using one's own background knowledge and experience. We also discuss the importance of being aware of one's emotional state. Most learners admit to varying degrees of nervousness when using a foreign language and occasionally this can be quite debilitating. Sharing these feelings can often help and we encourage students to look for other ways to control their anxieties.

3. Analysis of students' own strategies

As a further aid to helping students analyse their language learning behaviour, we ask them to complete the questionnaire about individual strategies that has been developed by Rebecca Oxford – the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). In this questionnaire the students are asked to assess on a scale of 1–5 how frequently they act in a certain way. The types of activities they are asked about are, for example,

"I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
I read for pleasure in English.
I try to find patterns in English.
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
I think about my progress in learning English.
I write down my feelings in a learning diary.
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers."

Oxford, 1990

The scores are added up and averaged and the student ends up with a profile of his or her strategies, grouped according to Oxford’s categories. An example of a typical student’s profile is shown in Figure 3.

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**TABLE**

1. **Affective**, such as anxiety reduction through laughter and mediation, self-encouragement through affirmations, and self-reward through praise and tangible reinforcement;
2. **Social**, such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware;
3. **Metacognitive**, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating progress, and monitoring errors;
4. **Memory related**, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, moving physically, and structured reviewing;
5. **General cognitive**, such as reasoning, analysing, summarising, and practising;
6. **Compensatory**, such as guessing meanings from the context and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning.

**FIGURE 2. Rebecca Oxford’s system of language learning strategies.** (1992)
end of the term, in order to see if it indicates any significant change (the above student's end-of-term profile can be seen on page 63).

We sum up the proceedings so far by pointing out that they have started on the road to becoming more conscious and reflective learners. They will need this knowledge of themselves when they start to plan their programme. Their self-knowledge will be of particular importance in planning how to achieve the objectives they will set. The objectives themselves may be based more on how they perceive their present and future needs for English. This leads us into the next stage.

4. Analysis of language needs, present and future

Now that the students are beginning to be more conscious of themselves as learners, we ask them to start considering the types of objectives they might set themselves for their ALMS module. We remind them that one set of strategies we have just looked at concerns areas like planning, organising and goal-setting. We also suggest that one way is to begin by considering their own needs, present and future. If they are working towards real needs, it should help them to integrate their language studies with other areas of their life which in turn should increase their motivation. In Chapter One we pointed out that autonomous language learning is not limited to the classroom. When Finnish students are asked where they think they have learned most of their English, school is not always the first answer. Their belief is that they learn much of their English from television, popular music, magazines, travel and so on. We encourage them in this view and suggest that they look for situations in their personal environment that will enhance their learning. For example, if they find that one of their main current needs for English is in their main subject studies, whether it is, for example, attending lectures in English or reading English text books, then they should think about how they could use this to consciously improve their English, which would also have the reciprocal effect of improv-
ing their academic performance. If on the other hand they feel inadequate in social or small-talk situations they should think of ways of dealing with this.

To help them focus their needs, the students complete an ALMS Needs Analysis form. (See shortened version in Fig. 4)

We have listed in the needs analysis many of the situations in which Finnish students may have a need for English. This is based on previous experience of students' expression of their needs but we also leave some open spaces where students may add what we have omitted in their particular case. For each situation the students mark whether they need English now and/or in the future. The four language skills areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking have been divided up here although we do point out that this is only for the sake of giving structure and focus to their own analysis. When they are planning their own programmes they are encouraged to integrate the skills.

At this point we also introduce the issue of evaluation. We remind the students that if they are to be autonomous this will entail not only setting their objectives and carrying out their own programmes but it will also mean that they should evaluate their own progress. In the ALMS module there is no final test for the students to take. On the one hand it would be against the principles of the programme and, on the other, it would be impossible to find a test which would suit the programmes of all the students. In fact, as mentioned in Chapter One, traditional testing has been given up in many of the Language Centre English courses in favour of continuous assessment, task completion or project work. In the ALMS programme we go one step further. We expect the students to constantly reflect on their own progress and to devise ways of showing themselves (and, in effect, the counsellor) that they are progressing. Clearly, if the students set themselves objectives, then these objectives should form the criteria for their evaluation. For example, if a student sets “extending the vocabulary of the field” as an objective and decides to achieve this by working on relevant English text books, they could produce work which incorporates as much new vocabulary as possible. This might be in the form of an essay, a summary, a glossary, a report of a discussion on the subject and so on. The important word here is “production”. Throughout the programme we encourage students to produce language, be it in written or spoken form. Operating in parallel with production is reflection on the product and the process. This is the core to
the evaluation. We will return to this issue later in the discussion on counselling, logs and record-keeping.

One of the first steps in the evaluation process is the students’ own assessment of their level of proficiency. On the needs analysis form, they are also asked to grade themselves on a scale of 1–5. Again, this is for their own benefit. We hasten to add that we are not going to test these self-assessments. On the contrary it is our experience that students give very accurate assessments of their own levels. The purpose is, again, to help them see areas of greatest need for development which they can then balance with the actual needs for English in those contexts.

5. The students’ own objectives

The students have now reached a stage when they should be thinking of their programme for the term. We give them an ALMS DRAFT form on which they jot down any ideas they might have (see sample Draft form in Fig. 5).

We suggest they write on the draft page the language areas they want to develop and how they envisage going about achieving their objectives. At this point we give few concrete suggestions as to what they might do. We thus avoid giving preconceived ideas which might prevent them from creating something personal and innovative. We encourage them to discuss ideas with others, for example, to find out if they can get a group together to concentrate on a particular topic or activity. After a short interval we ask a few students to say what they have written down so that others may be inspired by it.

We are now approaching the end of a long, hard session. For many students, it has meant exposure to a lot of new ideas. The six hours are also spent listening to, thinking, talking and speaking English. We have felt it important to hold this session in English for a number of reasons. Firstly, since we are asking them to reflect on, analyse and evaluate their English, it seems natural to ask them to do this in an English-speaking context. They can immediately assess their own capacities, weaknesses and emotional state. Secondly, we aim to set an example for the

FIGURE 5. ALMS Draft

rest of the time spent within the ALMS programme. We want them to get used to operating fully in English rather than compartmentalising their languages into different functions. Thus, during the programme they write their logs, journals and other means of record-keeping and reflection in English. They can express themselves more freely in these areas, worrying less about producing error-free language. They are not just here to learn English for its own sake. They are here to learn English for their own purposes and one of those purposes is to become more independent and autonomous learners. We believe that using English to achieve that end is one way in which they can make the language their own, part of their own identity. Thirdly, on a practical level, the time students spend
on an ALMS module is fairly limited. Every hour they spend using English is precious so we feel that the nine compulsory hours of induction into the programme should also be in English. Of course, we are in the situation that most of our students are capable of coping with this in English and weaker students are given as much support as possible. There might be contexts where these preliminary sessions would be held wholly or partly in their first language.

6. Making preliminary plans and thinking about areas of interest

Before the students leave the "ALMS Room" we ask them to help us with one final thing. We show them a list of potential support groups that may be set up if there is sufficient demand. Figure 6 shows an example of this list.

This list is based on previous experience of the areas in which a number of students have expressed the need for teacher and/or group support. Extra ones that are not already mentioned on the list can be added, for example, those that have come up during the day’s session. The students mark the areas that interest them and add any others they can think of. Informally we have called this last piece of paper the students' "wish list". We remind them that they are not committing themselves at this point to any set programme but that we need this information in order to see the types and numbers of groups that we should try to set up.

The two first weeks of the ALMS modules are very busy ones for the teachers. In the Autumn term of 1996, for example, during the first week we held seven sessions to accommodate the students (approx. 160) who had signed up for the ALMS programme. For the first two weeks the students come to the sessions which are specifically assigned to their faculty. After this many of the support groups will contain students from several faculties but at the beginning we feel they need the chance to discuss the special needs of their subject. They are also introduced to a teacher (the "Faculty Language Teacher") who specialises in the English of their field and can give advice on materials, tapes and videos, for example.

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UNIVERSITY/FACULTY ___________________________  

Please mark any of the groups you might be interested in and add any others that would like to suggest:

**SKILL SUPPORT GROUPS**

1. **ORAL**  
   - presentation skills  
   - social skills  
   - discussion club  
   - conversation groups  
   - drama  
   - newsletter group

2. **WRITING**  
   - practical writing eg, letters, C.V.s  
   - writing essays, papers etc  
   - creative writing

3. **LISTENING**  
   - self-access

4. **READING**  
   - general reading skills  
   - reading for writing  
   - reading, writing, discussion

5. **INDIVIDUAL/GROUP PROJECTS**  
   - special projects  
   - E-mail  
   - Amnesty

6. **OTHERS**

**FIGURE 6. Student form for indicating interest in particular support groups**

After all the first sessions have been completed a grand meeting is held for all the teachers involved in the ALMS programme. At this meeting we calculate, based on the students' expressed wishes, how many and what kind of support groups we can establish that term. Various factors have to be taken into account. Firstly, we want to offer as much choice as possible to the students. This means covering as many of the
wishes as possible and setting up as many groups as we can. Secondly, since we will be setting the time and date of the first meetings of these support groups, we have to vary these as much as possible. Some students are working, others live far from Helsinki and others have very strict timetables so, for example, we try to set up evening meetings. Thirdly, we are, of course, limited by the number of teacher hours available. All groups will involve a certain amount of teacher contact, whether it is a couple of hours or several intensive sessions, and this must be taken into account.

This brings us to the second session of the term. This is also a compulsory session in which the students write their contracts, commit themselves to various support groups, become familiar with the self-access studio and its materials and have a brief consultation with a teacher over their programme. The 2-3 hour session is led by the "Faculty Language Teacher" who holds overall responsibility for the students from a particular faculty, dealing with institutional duties and holding two counselling sessions during the term with each student from this group.

B. Contracts/projects

The main task for the students in the second session is to plan their programme for the term. We give them an ALMS Contract for this purpose which they can use to lay out their ideas for projects (See Fig. 7).

It is stressed to the students, however, that in spite of its name, this contract is not a legal document! There is no punishment for failing to keep the contract! Naturally, during the term, students may want to re-think their programme. Some projects may become so interesting that the student wants to put more work into it and cut down on something else. We encourage the students to continuously re-assess and, if necessary, re-plan their work. Nevertheless, it is wise to have a structure to start off with and, in particular, to have some degree of commitment to the various support groups the student decides to join.
How do the students decide on their programme? By this stage, there are various factors to be taken into account. Firstly, as the reader will remember, the student is not alone in autonomy. The students are able to network and circulate, to get inspiration and motivation from others. They may decide to set up their own partnerships or groups in order to fulfil all or part of the programme. Students who are very keen on developing their oral skills may join a discussion group which specialises in their degree subject. In addition, they may decide to attend a free conversation group with students from different faculties and, finally, they may decide to join a support group on presentation skills as this may fulfil a perceived future need.

Secondly, as we have seen, students base their programmes partly on their perceived needs, both in the present and in the future. They consider how they can integrate or link their English studies with their other degree courses. They may confer with another academic tutor to ask if they can write a term paper in English. They may then join a support group in academic writing in order to get help with their project.

Thirdly, when students consider the means of achieving their objectives they bear in mind their own learning styles and strategies. No student is forced to work in a prescribed way as this would be de-motivating and inhibiting. On the other hand, students are encouraged to experiment in new ways, such as the use of drama or creative writing.

Fourthly, inevitably in a university setting where they are taking English as a compulsory requirement, students are bound to bear in mind the amount of time they are expected to work in order to gain their credits. Two credits are generally considered to approximate 80 hours of work, so this is just one of the elements that the students have to consider when they set their objectives. Quite frequently, the counsellor offers advice in this area in order that students neither take on too much nor too little.

Fifthly, the students refer to the programme of support groups that the teachers have planned. A sample of a support group schedule is shown in Figure 8.
A brief explanation of Figure 8 is called for. Firstly, it is important to remember that it is based on the wishes expressed by the students in their first session of the ALMS programme. Thus, the nature and number of groups in each area depends on the amount of interest expressed and on what we consider to be an optimal size for such a group. Secondly, the time and date of only the first meeting of each group is given. All the ensuing meetings will be discussed and negotiated in that first session. Thirdly, the initials of the teacher with overall responsibility for that group are given. That teacher will be present at the first meeting but further contact will depend on the group, the teacher and the nature of the topic area. (Further information about the support groups will be given later in this chapter and in Chapter Five)

The teacher goes through the support group schedule, discussing with the students the kinds of activities which may take place in the various support groups. Again it is stressed that the content and organisation of the support groups will largely come from the students, helped if necessary by a teacher. Furthermore students are not obliged to join any of the support groups on offer. They may prefer to set up their own groups or, indeed, they may prefer to work entirely alone. All these approaches are possible as long as they can verbalise their motivations and explain their intentions. However, we do recommend that students join at least one support group as it provides some sort of framework, the group (usually) encourages solidarity and the student will feel more “in touch”, which may be important, at least at the beginning of the term.

The teacher also shows the students the materials which are at their disposal in the ALMS Room and in the Self Access Studio. The ALMS Room is a classroom in the Language Centre which has been reserved for the ALMS Project. One wall has shelves on which we keep ALMS Support Materials (described below), spare LOG sheets, project report sheets, magazines, newspapers and other reading materials for students. There is a cupboard containing reference books and a post box which students and teachers may use to exchange mail. Another wall has a very crowded notice board which is again used by students and teachers to display notices of group meetings and other activities. This room, which seats 24, can be reserved by ALMS teachers and students for their group activities and students may come at any time to work there. There are ten two-seater tables which can be arranged in many ways depending on the type of group. There is a small room off the ALMS Room which acts as the office of the ALMS project and as a counselling room.

The ALMS Support Materials consist of various booklets, files and folders that have been put together by teachers so that students working in groups or on their own may refer to them for help in a variety of skills ranging from listening to writing to reading and so on. Students may refer to them in the ALMS Room or they may photocopy papers to take them home. They are especially intended for students who do not join the support groups but prefer to work alone or in groups they have established themselves.

On the same floor of the Language Centre can be found the Self Access Studio which students can also use for self study. There is a wide range of materials on tape and video - both pedagogical and authentic materials. There is also satellite television and computers with access to the Internet and a growing collection of CALL materials. The materials are currently being put onto a database system which will make it easier for students to search for and access materials. At present we give the students brief catalogues of tapes and videos which are relevant to their particular degree subjects, but naturally they are free to explore and make use of all the materials in the Self Access Studio. The Studio is staffed by technical and advisory personnel who help the students locate and use the equipment. (More information about Listening Skills in Chapter Five.)

During this session the teacher also reminds the students of their record-keeping responsibilities. Students may keep diaries or journals of their progress if they wish but the minimum requirement is that they keep a LOG of their work. As can be seen from the model in Figure 9, students are expected to keep details of the time and place of work and give a description, evaluation and comments on the work done.
The LOG plays a central role in the ALMS process and it has a threefold purpose. Firstly, it provides a simple record of time spent working on English. This is obviously necessary in our institutionalised context where one of the criteria for gaining credit is that students are expected to put in a minimum amount of work. In addition to entering records of group meetings and meetings with teachers, the students are encouraged to include all activities where they can show that there has been some kind of progress in their English. They do need to be able to describe and demonstrate that progress. Secondly, the LOG acts as an aid to students in their reflective processes. For those students who are reluctant to write lengthy diaries recording their experiences and feelings, the LOG offers a minimum alternative in which the student spends some time processing and evaluating their work. Thirdly, it is a useful link between the counsellors and the students. It provides a quick way for the counsellors to assess a student’s progress and it often leads to fruitful discussion of the process.

Before the students leave this second ALMS session they have a brief consultation with one of the teachers present. The purpose of this is, firstly, to check that each student has grasped the principles and the requirements of the system. The students circle the support groups they intend to join and also show their contracts. The teacher makes a quick note of these on the student’s record sheet (see later in the chapter) and may ask questions or make suggestions about the student’s programme and objectives. Finally, the students make a date for their first counselling session with the ALMS Counsellor.

Although the students have considerable freedom in planning their ALMS programme for the term, it cannot be forgotten that we are working within an institution. Certain requirements have to be made of the students to ensure that this mode of fulfilling their English requirement is the equivalent of the other alternatives. All students receive a paper (See Fig. 10) which covers these minimum requirements so that they are fully aware of the formal structure of the programme.
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS OF ALMS MODULE

1. Attendance at first group session (6 hrs).
2. Attendance at second group session (3 hrs).
3. Individual meeting (15 mins) with the counsellor before Oct 11.
4. Individual meeting (15 mins) with the Faculty teacher before November 8.
5. Drawing up a study plan and writing contracts which are agreed upon and confirmed by the Faculty teacher.
6. Keeping a detailed LOG of work completed. There should be TWO copies of this – one for the student’s own use and one to be given to the Counsellor.
7. Attendance at the relevant group project sessions which are agreed upon at the beginning.
8. Attendance at the group evaluation meeting with the counsellor at the end of term (2 hrs).
9. Individual final assessment meeting with the Faculty teacher (15 mins). Fill in Completion report.

FIGURE 10. Minimum requirements of the ALMS Module, Autumn 1996

When the last student leaves the second session of the ALMS Module, we feel that the programme is finally on its way. The students have their programmes, the calendar for the next month is already full with various student meetings, the counsellors have their records set up and ready to be used and there is only a flutter of panic in our hearts. Will we ever see the students again? However, sure enough, individual students start appearing to look at the Support Materials in the ALMS Room and when the first meeting date is due, the ALMS Room comes alive with the bustle of the first Support Group.

C. Support groups

The support groups are not the main focus of the programme but they do provide a framework with guidance and support to those who want or need it. Some students feel they need the structure and security of the groups, at least at the beginning, and they may join several groups. However, students are not obliged to join any groups. In Spring 1995, for example, we had 5 Education students who formed their own group. They met for 3–4 hours each week and prepared a carefully worked out programme covering all the skills. They also kept a detailed journal. A case study of this group appears in Chapter Four.

As already described above, the number and nature of the support groups varies each term as they are arranged according to the wishes of the students. However, the groups usually cover the three skills areas of oral, writing and reading skills. Support groups are not usually set up for listening skills although some students form partnerships or small groups and plan their listening together. More details about how the support groups, in general, approach the skills will be found in Chapter Six of this book.

The teacher’s role in the support groups varies according to the teacher, the group objectives and the students. In principle, we believe that teacher contact hours should be kept to a minimum, particularly in groups in which students are encouraged to set up their own communication networks. However, each group takes on its own particular character and we have found that while some groups take off on their own and require a minimum of help from the teacher, other groups, possibly for reasons of internal dynamics, require and ask for more support from the teacher. This is a question of negotiation and sensitivity on the part of the teacher.

D. Counselling

Counselling forms another important element of the ALMS programme. Each student attends three counselling sessions, at the beginning, middle and end of the term. They are a good way of maintaining contact with the students who are working to a greater or lesser degree independently. They also offer support to students who may at times feel lost or unsure of their progress. They provide the counsellor with invaluable information about the process that the individual students are going through, and they also give the student the chance to
verbalise their feelings about themselves as learners and their possibly changing identity.

Since the early days of the ALMS project we have stuck to the principle that each student is guided through the system by two teachers. One teacher takes the role of "ALMS Counselor", running the opening learning awareness session, the first individual counselling meeting and the final group session. The other teacher is known as the "Faculty Language Teacher" and is responsible for the second compulsory session, where the students write their contracts, and the second and third counselling sessions.

The nature of each counselling session is somewhat different. During the first counselling sessions, the ALMS Counselor elicits from the students their understanding of the programme and their reaction to it. They are asked what they consider autonomous language learning to mean and how they are realising it in practice. The student's personal objectives and programme are discussed and contracts adjusted, if necessary. The aim is to ensure that the students feel comfortable within the system and have a clear idea of the term ahead.

The second counselling session is taken by the Faculty Language Teacher and consists of a discussion of the process and progress that the student is undergoing. By this stage the student should already have a fairly lengthy LOG of work which can be used as the basis for discussion. There is usually a collection of work which the student would like to discuss and show as evidence of progress. There are likely to be some changes made to the programme as the student has become involved in various projects, some of which may be taking more or less time than anticipated. The teacher may be able to make helpful suggestions about potentially useful materials.

In the third and final counselling session, the Faculty Language Teacher expects the students to show that they have successfully completed the programme. The students explain the time they have put in and the work they have done in that time. There is an ALMS Completion form that they can use to summarise their achievements. They will discuss what they feel they have gained in terms of language learned as well as of their own development as language learners. There will also be some talk about their future and how they think the ALMS programme will influence that. Finally they together reach a conclusion as to whether the student has satisfied the requirements of the course in order that the teacher may inform the Study Affairs Office of the credits gained.

The teachers make notes of the counselling sessions in the student record sheet so that the following counsellor may refer to the records. After the final counselling session the Faculty Language Teacher closes the record and files them away for later reference if necessary.

Counselling has been a new and challenging area for us. Of course, all responsible teachers try to counsel their students whenever possible or necessary but this has been the first time for many of us that it has been incorporated into the system. The sessions are also proving to be the source of a great deal of interesting information about the learner. We have already made use of the counselling sessions to carry out a pilot research project on attitudes and motivation. This research is described in Chapter Three. However, we intend to work more on this area and carry out further research. New teachers entering the programme also feel insecure with this new role and it would be useful to develop a more specific picture of the role and the interaction involved. It might well be worth developing some kind of training or induction process for new counsellors.

E. Record keeping and evaluation

Since the students in the ALMS programme are following individual programmes and are highly dispersed, we have had to develop a thorough system of record keeping. During the term, an individual student may come into contact with as many as eight different teachers, who certainly keep their own records of the groups they are involved in, but there needs to be a central record in which any teacher may make an entry.
In the initial session, each student completes a Student Record Sheet (see Fig. 11) which is then filed according to the faculty of the student. These files are kept in the ALMS office and gradually become filled in as the term progresses, as has been described above. Other materials, such as copies of logs and contracts, are also kept here.

The students' own record keeping is based on the ALMS LOG which has been described above. In addition they keep various records and reports of groups and projects that they are involved in. Those who wish to do so also keep a diary or journal and some have found this to be a good way of recording thoughts and feelings as well as specific activities. Most of the students keep all their ALMS materials in a folder, given at the opening session, which includes many of the documents they will need.

Finally, at the end of the term, all students are required to attend a group session, led by an ALMS Counsellor, in which an overview of the whole module is carried out. This entails discussion about the past term, its successes and failures, personal discoveries, and intentions for the future. The students are asked to cast their minds back to the first session where they began to analyse themselves as learners and to see how far they have progressed. If they have not yet had their final individual counselling session they are given time to fill in their ALMS completion form, in readiness for that meeting. They also repeat the SILL questionnaire, compare their two profiles and discuss the implications. The end-of-term profile of the student whose strategy profile was shown earlier in this chapter is shown in Figure 12. It can be seen that there was a general increase in strategy use which is particularly marked in the earlier weak areas of organising and evaluating and learning with others. Again, the accuracy and viability of this is open to question and it may simply represent an increase in conscious awareness of strategies - but this is the minimum that we are hoping for.

The last task we give them before leaving is the completion of a detailed evaluation form. Although this may have the side benefit of helping them focus on their own learning process, the main purpose of this evaluation form is to provide us with

![Graph](image_url)

A represents the group of strategies: remembering more effectively
B represents the group of strategies: using all your mental processes
C represents the group of strategies: compensating for missing knowledge
D represents the group of strategies: organising and evaluating your learning
E represents the group of strategies: managing your emotions
F represents the group of strategies: learning with others
Avge = your overall average

**Figure 12. One student's strategy profile at the beginning and at the end of an ALMS module (adapted from SILL, Oxford 1990)**
information about the various elements in the system.

Their views on all aspects of the programme are requested, from the general to the particular. The full range of support groups are listed so that they may comment on their own particular programme. They are asked to evaluate the materials on offer, the self-access studio, the counselling and so on. They are also asked to express their attitudes towards autonomy and their own experience of it.

These student responses have been invaluable to us in our development of the programme. Teachers have benefited from the feedback on particular support groups and workshops. It has also meant that we have collected a large amount of data which has been, and will continue to be, an excellent contribution to our research.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a lengthy and detailed description of the ALMS programme. We are not claiming that our programme is entirely successful, or that we end up with perfectly autonomous students. It would be foolish to hope for such a result in such a short time or at such an early stage of the experiment. We have, unsurprisingly, found that students and teachers vary in their reactions to our system. We still think that students (and teachers) should be given choices in the way they tackle learning (or teaching) a language and it would be dangerous to impose any one system on any one individual. Again, we would like to reiterate that we are not suggesting that other teachers would adopt exactly the same system. Every context is different, whether it be a different institutional context or a different cultural context. We do feel, however, that many of the basic principles outlined in Chapter One could be a common factor between different adaptations of the programme. As to the future, the programme will undoubtedly change as we learn more from our own experience as well as from other’s. We are continuing to carry out research projects which will further our knowledge. The next two chapters of this book will describe some of the research that has already been done.

**CHAPTER THREE**

Research into attitudes towards autonomy among teachers and learners, and the process of change

Joan Nordlund

**Background**

Autonomous Learning Modules are voluntary at Helsinki University Language Centre (HULC), in that students choose to fulfil their language requirement this way, but the requirement is compulsory. Alternative courses are offered, usually with set times and programmes, and on a teacher-led basis. Many courses involve some kind of formal assessment, although others ‘only’ require the completion of certain tasks.

Most students do the language element in their studies in their first or second year at university. However, a substantial minority delay it for various reasons; they may be worried because their skills are weak, they may have too many other commitments, or they may just prefer to do it later. Consequently, there are a number of older students on the language courses, many of whom feel worried about their English skills.

Some students have acute needs, if they are about to leave on an Erasmus programme, for example, and others have jobs which make regular weekly attendance in class extremely difficult. Many are under pressure to fulfil the language requirement in their degree programme, in particular more mature students who are about to graduate.

Language Centre courses are short - 40 to 160 hours giving one to four credits, depending on the faculty and the elements
included. As far as the ALMS courses are concerned, the set time has to include learner training and awareness, and organisational aspects.

Aims - why we did this research

The REAL (REsearchers into Autonomous Learning) Team was set up in 1995 by five teachers who had been involved in the development of the autonomous learning project (Kaija Ervola, Leena Karlsson, Felicity Kjisik, Joan Nordlund and Diane Pilkinton-Pihko; DPP has since left the Language Centre).

As far as we knew, this was the first project of its kind in Finland, and we wanted to put HULC on the map as a pioneer, or at least to report the project. Moreover, we were encouraged by the positive student reactions to believe that the system was working, and that some students felt it was more than just another language course. We believed in the approach too, and felt it was worth sharing our experiences. It seems that, for pedagogical (and economic) reasons, demand for this type of course will increase.

We organised our own summer seminar in June 1995, after which we decided to write up our experiences in the form of a book to be offered to Helsinki University Press. We talked a lot about teacher and student roles and attitudes and how the project might have changed these. We teachers were certainly experiencing some changes in behaviour and attitude. Literature on autonomy does emphasise the change in the teacher’s role, from being a provider of information to being a facilitator of learning and manager of resources (Little, 1995). Naturally, this is not a sudden and total transformation, but it certainly made us think about power and responsibility. How far could we go? Relinquishing power does not mean relinquishing responsibility.

We were also anxious to pass on the message that autonomous learning is not synonymous with self study, or self access. The teacher’s role goes beyond pointing students at the self-access centre with a list of tasks, and telling them to get on with it.

We had collected a lot of usable data from and about students during the ALMS modules. This included information from their logs and other material they produced (such as diaries and journals), together with the records the teachers and counsellors had kept.

The evaluation forms that students filled in after the ALMS module gave some interesting comments about changes in attitude to English and to learning. These included (and there were many more): “It is a good way to study languages”, “It was more motivating than a traditional course”, “My attitude has changed – I am less nervous”, “I now have a more positive attitude to learning English”, “It really helped me to improve”. We thought it would be interesting to use the data we had, and to get some more systematic information about changes and feelings, for inclusion as resource material for the book.

According to van Els et al. (1984), although lots of research has been done into attitudes to target languages, their speakers and culture, not so much is available on attitude changes as a result of language study, or on attitudes to second language learning and teaching. We therefore decided to do a pilot research study involving teachers in the ALMS project at HULC, and ALMS students, during Autumn 1995.

Our main aims, therefore, were to see if we could detect what, if any, attitude changes were taking place among students and teachers involved in ALMS.

Attitudes and motivation

Much has been written about attitudes and motivation, attitude measurement and attitude change. It is not the intention to go into great detail here, but there are some general points that have a bearing on our research questions and which I feel are worth exploring a little.

Attitudes may be defined as “a kind of mental set representing a predisposition to form certain opinions” (Tiffin & McCor-
mick, 1952). They seem to comprise cognitive (to do with beliefs), affective (to do with positive and negative feelings) and conative (to do with behaviour and behavioural intentions) components (van Els et al., 1984). They are often said to be learned, though they may be subconscious. They may be based on rational information or on emotional feelings, but the effect is the same. They tend to be relatively stable but, like anything that is learned, may be subject to change.

People’s attitude to learning may be formed early in life, and can be affected by such apparently positive things as being praised for ‘trying’ (Borger & Seaburne, 1966). Such praise may be seen as implied criticism that the trying did not produce a good enough result; success is the goal, and this is not immediately being achieved. Learning should rather be seen as a continuous process and not only as a means to a specific end. A primary objective of education, therefore, should be to develop the ability to learn, and to promote active learning. An active learner may be described as someone with the ability to organise their own work, and who desires to do so (ibid.). This could describe an autonomous learner too.

In the context of language learning, it is useless merely to talk about attitudes. We need to establish ‘to what’. Gardner (1985) discusses two types of attitude - those related to learning the language, and those related to the ‘other-language community’ (i.e. the French-speaking community when French is the target language). It seems that attitudes to the former are consistently (though not exclusively) related to achievement, while the latter are more diffuse. The focus in this chapter is on attitudes to learning languages in general, and English in particular. People’s experience of language learning at school varies a great deal, and many students have negative memories, even if they did well. Comments on our evaluation forms such as “I never knew learning English could be so much fun” bear this out, and point to some attitude change.

Language learning attitudes have also been suggested to fall into either educational or social categories, to be affected by the sex of the learner (females tend to be more positive than males), and by upbringing and parental attitudes. It is also sometimes claimed that people feel less positive about learning a second language as they get older, although it is not clear why, and many older students are highly motivated. It may have something to do with feelings of failure (Hernick & Kennedy, 1968); older students may not wish to appear less capable than their younger counterparts. This, again, suggests an association between attitudes towards learning and achievement. Little (1995) went so far as to suggest that a positive attitude was a prerequisite for autonomous learning.

Attitudes and motivation have been lumped together in a cluster of factors to explain success or failure in second language learning. It has been argued more recently, however, that attitudes are directly related to motivation, which in turn is directly related to learning (van Els et al., 1984). This relationship is affected by the type of motivation. The integrative kind presupposes a positive attitude of the learner towards the target language speakers and their culture, whereas the instrumentally motivated learner may not have such a positive approach.

It should perhaps be mentioned here that a lot of research into attitudes to second language learning has been carried out in bilingual communities concerning the majority or minority language. This is not the case with English in Finland, which is learned more as a lingua franca. There is an emphasis on language learning from early school years, and most school children opt for English as their main foreign language; this involves eight years of study before the matriculation examination. Moreover, many Finns are exposed to English in the media, through satellite broadcasting and computer communications, and often on the street in larger conurbations. Attitudes to the language are generally positive.

Something should be said about teacher attitudes, too. To a greater or lesser extent, teachers establish rules (and may flout them), set assessment criteria and evaluate their students’ performance. Students may also have a self-evaluating role, but their evaluations usually carry less weight (Chase, 1988). The way in which teachers establish and maintain their authority, how they hold on to their power and how willing they are
to take risks must affect the students in their care. It should be noted, too, that learners do not necessarily accept any transfer of power from the teacher to them, nor do they necessarily or automatically accept responsibility for their own learning.

Finally, a few words about attitudes and autonomy. As David Little wrote in System (1995), there is nothing new in the idea of learner autonomy, which he sees as responsibility for one’s own learning and the maintenance of a positive attitude towards it. It must be said that it is not universally accepted that personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. Research evidence does show, however, that learners’ active and independent involvement in their own learning (autonomy) increases motivation and therefore increases learning effectiveness (Dickinson, 1995). It has also been shown that learners who do accept responsibility are more likely to achieve their targets, and are thus more likely to maintain a positive attitude (Little, 1995).

Assumptions and hypotheses

We embarked upon our research project into attitude change under certain assumptions.

As David Little said (1995), the teacher brings herself to her teaching, no matter how tight or loose the curriculum. This provides a basis for developing teacher autonomy, which he sees as a prerequisite for learner autonomy. Our first assumption was that teachers would think more about their role and about student responsibility. They would experience “withdrawal symptoms” in terms of letting go of power, and there would be mixed reactions and coping mechanisms.

The second assumption was that ALMS is a good thing. We felt good about it as teachers, and although some students felt they were more suited to teacher-led courses, none said ALMS did not work, or that it was a waste of time.

Thirdly, we realised that the reasons why students enrolled for ALMS would vary. Some would be interested in the method and the flexibility. Some would think it was the “easy way out” – that they would not need to do as much work as on a regular course. Others would think it was their only alternative for practical reasons, and some would drift into it.

Fourthly, we thought that those who did it for the “right” reasons – i.e. for reasons associated with their own learning – would benefit most, but others might experience unexpected and drastic changes in attitude and/or learning. We also assumed that any changes in attitude would be positive, since we had heard only positive comments about such changes from students face to face and through the evaluation forms. Moreover, an underlying assumption was that increased motivation has a positive effect on learning.

Fifthly, we realised that some students and teachers might not be happy with the idea of autonomy, and would go back to more traditional methods. This, again, was supported by comments from students and informal discussions with teachers.

Finally, we thought that ALMS would awaken students to the idea of being responsible for their own learning in general. It would also help them to develop individual learning strategies, and to take learning outside of the classroom. It should be mentioned that this is easy enough given the amount of English available in Helsinki. We also hoped it would increase their motivation to continue learning afterwards – not necessarily through formal courses. It would help to bridge the gap between learning English and using / observing it.

Methods

“The problem with attitudes is that they are not directly observable, but can only be inferred from the behaviours or statements of the person in question” (Gardner, 1985).

Given this major constraint, various ways of measuring attitudes have nevertheless gained acceptance and validity. Tiffin & McCormick (1952) suggested the following possible ways of measuring employee attitudes:

- by feelings, which is an informal, unsystematic method;
- by analysing concrete changes, which is indirect, and the changes may be influenced by other things;
- by attitude scales;
- by opinion surveys and/or questionnaires;
- by interviews.

It seems that no method is perfect. Feelings are subjective, and analysis may produce ambiguous results. It is accepted that respondents to questionnaires, and interviewees, may give answers they think are acceptable, and this must be borne in mind if conclusions are drawn from this kind of data.

Given these constraints, we decided on the following research methods. We would devise questionnaires to send to the teachers involved. We would interview the students on the Autumn 1995 ALMS programme, at different points during the term and following guidelines to be drawn up. We would use some information from student evaluations, and we would bear in mind informal discussions among teachers. The questionnaire which was sent to the teachers, and the guidelines for the interviews with students, are given in Appendices 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter.

**Teachers**

In order to find out about teacher attitudes, we had informal discussions before and during the experiment with teachers involved and others who were interested, curious or even sceptical. We also tried to analyse our own feelings in the context of power and responsibility. We devised a questionnaire to be sent to the eight teachers working on the project at that time (Appendix 1).

The questionnaire covered teachers' reasons for getting involved in ALMS, their perceptions about what it meant, both beforehand and at the time the questionnaire was distributed, their perceptions about the roles of teachers and students, and any changes noticed in attitudes towards learner-teacher relationships. The eight teachers who had been involved were given the questionnaire, and seven completed and returned it.

**Students**

ALMS students in Autumn, 1995, were the subjects of the study on student attitudes. The participants were from the Faculties of Humanities, Social Science and Education, and from the University of Art and Design.

The prime source of data consisted of the interview notes made by teachers in accordance with the format we agreed upon (Appendix 2). Interviews were held at and in conjunction with the three counselling sessions over the period of the course (see Ch. 2 on the roles of the counsellors). The first session was run by the ALMS counsellor about one month into the programme, the second and third were by the faculty counsellors halfway through and at the end of the programme. The interviews covered the students' reasons for doing ALMS, what they thought it meant then and now, their feelings and attitudes towards learning English, their own learning styles, their feelings about the role of the teacher in learning, and whether these had changed, and what kind of language learning suited them. Data was obtained for 74 students, but not all of them had completed the course by December, 1995, and a few missed one or more counselling sessions. Thus the data is not complete.

The fifty-two course evaluations filled in after the Autumn 1995 programme were also used, plus some information from other evaluations. These evaluation forms were designed to elicit student opinions about the course and its contents, but also to encourage them to reflect about the language learning process. For the purposes of this research, we confined ourselves to comments about the course in general and feelings about autonomous language learning.

**Limitations**

It might seem relatively straightforward to assess whether a particular language programme results in changes in attitude, but in reality, it is rather complex. What aspects of the language programme are thought to cause the change? What attitudes
change? Are we assuming that attitudes are negative to begin with?

We tried to address these issues when we designed the questionnaires and interview guidelines, but inevitably we noticed ways in which they could have been improved as we used them.

The research was undertaken as a pilot project, and as action research to help in the development of the ALMS programme. The project was designed, and the research conducted, in conjunction with normal teaching duties and in student counselling time. As the research progressed, and in particular as the data was being analysed, certain limitations became apparent.

The student interviews were not totally consistent. Different interviewers asked questions in different ways, interpreted responses differently, and sometimes skipped questions or accepted unclear responses. The open-ended nature of the questions possibly caused some inconsistencies in interpretation, for both teachers and students.

There were also inconsistencies in the questions. We realised that it was no use asking students what they thought at some time in the past; they should have been questioned before the course began. They were probably affected by their learner training day, and may have answered what they thought they should answer. At the very least they were more aware of what ALMS was all about and therefore not naive. We may have asked leading questions, too (What targets have you set yourself? - assuming they had set some). Students were also often prompted by the interviewer, for various reasons including time and language constraints.

Since the interviews were done as part of the course, and the course was being conducted in English, English was used in the interviews. Many students could cope with this perfectly well, but others had problems understanding the implications of the questions, and in expressing themselves fully in their replies. The time spent on the interviews was not consistent either, since they were also counselling sessions, and teachers were working to a tight time schedule.

The research was qualitative rather than quantitative, and the data analysis was done without using scientific methods such as factor analysis. Thus, the conclusions we made were based on intuitive interpretation and general trends. Nevertheless, we feel that this pilot study was worth doing, and that the results are valid.

Results

Teachers

Seven of the eight teachers returned the questionnaires concerning their involvement in ALMS. Three of them joined it in order to develop an existing interest in self access/learner centredness, two wished to keep up to date with current trends and/or join a development team, one was curious, and one came into it by chance (Figure 1).

Initial perceptions of autonomous learning varied, but all the teachers felt it involved more student control and a change in the teacher's role, and that students are given choice and responsibility, and are expected to show initiative.

These views were reinforced as the project proceeded. Some teachers were more aware of the need to train students to be autonomous learners, and more aware that autonomy does not mean learning on one's own. Some teachers expressed reservations that some students may use it as the "easy way out".

The teacher's role was seen as that of counsellor, consultant, co-worker, facilitator, guide, catalyst, trainer and administra-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To develop existing interests</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To keep up-to-date</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By chance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1. Teacher questionnaire:
Question 1. What were your reasons for getting involved in ALMS?
9. How do you best learn things?
11. What did you think autonomous learning meant before?
   What do you think it means now?
12. What do you think the role of the teacher is in learning?
   Have these views changed?
13. What kind of course would you best learn from?

In response to question 1 (What is your plan? What targets have you set?), 57 students (77%) mentioned targets related to language improvement, mostly in the area of oral skills, but noticeably also in general skills, writing and reading. Writing has not traditionally featured in English Oral Skills or Reading Comprehension courses, and this response indicates a need for it. Only seven students mentioned targets related to subject-specific language. This is often assumed to be a prime need in Language Centre courses, so these students’ responses are interesting.

Seventeen responses (23%) were related to personal development, mostly (10) involving gaining more confidence to use English. However, three students wanted to develop their learning skills, two mentioned goals to do with becoming more independent as learners, and two mentioned self awareness and reflection. Five students (7%) mentioned specific needs such as the prospect of studying abroad or otherwise needing to use English, and eight (11%) gave practical goals, such as wishing to fulfil language requirements (6 people) and to combine subject and language studies (3). Eleven students (15%) had no specific targets or plans.

These results are summarised in Figure 2. Note that the figures do not add up to 74 (the number of respondents), since many people gave multiple responses. This applies to most of the results reported here.

Most people (65%) said in response to question 2 (Are you working individually, in pairs or in groups?) that they were combining individual and group work, and 12 (16%) were combining the three possibilities. Only three people (4%) were planning to work totally independently, and seven (9.5%) totally with other people. The results are summarised in Figure 3.
Under practical reasons, about half were to do with students’ own time and/or work constraints, and half to do with the flexibility of the programme (which could be the same thing). One person thought it would be the easier option. Of the 24 people who gave learning-related reasons, 15 wished to try a new method, and 11 thought it would be a better way to learn. Of the 15 who mentioned process-related reasons, eight referred to independent study, three each to the course set-up and taking responsibility for their own learning, and one mentioned focusing on the process. Most people who gave personal reasons (7) just liked the idea, and the remaining three had heard about the programme. The fact that only three people mentioned responsibility here is interesting, given the frequent references to this later and in the course evaluations.

The responses to question 3 are summarised in Figure 4.

We divided the responses to question 3 (Why did you choose ALMS?) into practical reasons (45: 61%), learning-related reasons (24: 32%), process-related reasons (15: 20%), personal reasons (10: 14%) and chance (6: 8%). One person did not know why they chose it, and one did not respond. Many students had multiple reasons, and we cannot say what were the overriding ones, if they existed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language improvement:</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral skills</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general skills</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject-specific language</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening/understanding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communicative skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increase confidence</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop learning skills</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve awareness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop autonomy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical goals</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meet degree requirements</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrate subject studies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2. Student interview:**
Question 1. What is your plan? What targets have you set?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working mode</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independently + in groups</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independently, groups, pairs</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In groups</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independently</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In pairs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independently + in pairs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 3. Student interview:**
Question 2. Are you working individually, in pairs or in groups?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time/work constraints</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flexibility</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the easy option</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning-related</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wish to try a new method</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a better way to learn</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process-related reasons</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility for learning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the course set-up</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to focus on the process</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reasons</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likes the idea</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by chance/the only option</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had heard about it</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 4. Student interview:**
Question 3. Why did you choose the ALMS module?
Next, we asked students what they expected before they came to the first meeting, and what they expected at the time of the interview, about one month later (question 4). We cannot be sure that the answers to the first part are entirely valid, since the question was asked retrospectively. Students may not have remembered what they expected, and they had had the benefit of the learner training day, which may have biased their answers. Again, many students gave multiple responses. Almost half (30: 41%) did not know what to expect (but may have thought it was something to do with . . .). Learning-related expectations were mentioned by 22 students (30%), including the opportunity to do more independent study (12), to get more speaking practice (4) and to learn in a new way (4). Sixteen students (22%) mentioned expectations to do with the course set-up – the flexibility, the workload and the organisation.

It was impossible to categorise 18 (24%) of the responses, because they appeared not to be relevant to the question. This was a problem that recurred, and possibly one result of conducting the research in English (respondents may not have fully understood the questions), of using several interviewers (they asked the questions in different ways and accepted different kinds of response), and of combining the interviews with the counselling sessions (there were time constraints for both interviewer and interviewee).

Expectations at the time of this interview fell into positive (58: 78%) and negative/unsure (15: 20%) response categories. Most people were clearly generally positive about the way things were going, and 11 said that the method suited them as learners. Of the negative responses, most were being cautious and still finding out, and a few were worried about the time and work involved.

The responses to question 4 are summarised in Figures 5a and 5b.

During the second interview session, students were asked about their learning, how they felt about learning English (question 7), if these feelings had changed (question 8), and how they best learned things (question 9). The response rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not know</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do with learning</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to do with independence</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a new approach</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do with the course set-up</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organisation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flexibility</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workload</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something different</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 5a. Student interview:**

**Question 4a. What did you expect before you came to the first meeting?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in general</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about their learning</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about the set-up</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure/negative</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>still finding out</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worried about the work/time</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generally confused/worried</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worried about the process</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 5b. Student interview:**

**Question 4b. How do you feel now?**

dropped a little here, since a few people dropped out of the programme, and some interview sessions were missed by the student or teacher.

Nobody expressed an obviously negative attitude to learning English, although four people said it was hard, and two that it was necessary. Most people (50) felt positive and motivated. Increased confidence was mentioned by 7 people, and more awareness by five. Asked if their feelings had
changed (question 8), 20 people said they had not, and we can only assume that these people felt positive in the first place. However, of the 34 responses indicating a change of feeling, 17 felt more positive and motivated, 11 were more confident, five mentioned the positive effects of increased responsibility and three said they were more aware of the language around them (i.e. outside of the classroom).

The responses to questions 7 and 8 are summarised in Figures 6a and 6b.

In response to question 9 (How do you best learn things?), 20 people (27%) referred to learning by doing (generally and specifically), and 19 (26%) to strategies – learning styles and awareness. These responses are summarised in Figure 7.

The final three questions were asked in conjunction with the final counselling session. The drop-out rate, in other words the number of people who did not attend the final counselling session at that time, increased to around 27 (37%), therefore the total number of responses dropped to around 47.

Once again, there was a problem with the retrospective nature of question 11A (What did you think autonomous learning meant before?), though we were interested in the change in perception as revealed by answers to 11B (What do you think it means now?). Answers to 11A included independence from the teacher (20 responses), responsibility for your own timetable/learning (13), teacher-directed self study (8), something different/more effective (4) and flexibility (3). Two people saw it as the easy way out, and seven did not know what it was.

Answers to question 11B (What do you think autonomous learning means now?) showed a marked increase in the number of students who now thought it meant responsibility for one's own learning (to 21 from 13), and a decrease in those who thought it merely meant independence from the teacher (to 15 from 20). Nobody now thought it meant teacher-directed self study, and two people mentioned its applicability outside the classroom. Two people said it did not mean being alone.

These results are summarised in Figure 8.

Question 12 covered student perceptions about the role of the teacher in learning, again with the idea of assessing
changes during the course of the ALMS programme. While 27 people saw teachers as supporters, advisers or guides, and 13 as motivators or co-learners, 16 people still saw them as providers of language, advice and materials, 5 as evaluators and one as organisers. Most people's feelings about the teacher's role had not changed (28). Of the 14 who had changed their views, the issues of increased student responsibility and the teacher as a motivator were raised, and the observation that the teacher was not always needed was made.

These results are summarised in Figures 9a and 9b.

Finally, students were asked what kind of course they would most learn from. Not surprisingly, half of those who responded (27) indicated an ALMS-type course, which could reflect the success of the module, but may also suggest some kind of halo effect. As many as eight respondents expressed the need for a more organised course - evidence enough that ALMS does not suit everyone. However, it seems that it is overwhelmingly liked by those it does suit.

The responses to question 13 are summarised in Figure 10.
Evaluations

ALMS evaluation forms have been used since the beginning of the project to get student feedback on the course in general and on specific elements of it, and to give us some idea of student feelings and attitudes. It was some of the comments from these forms that helped to motivate this research project. We decided to include information from the 52 evaluations of the Autumn 1995 course to complement information from the interviews with the students. Some general comments rather than particular ratings are picked out, although it might be worth mentioning that for 28 people (54%), the course fully met their expectations (see Figure 11).

On a general level, the course was found to be interesting and suitable (“I enjoyed English for the first time”). The introductory sessions were seen as positive, and seemed to be the awakening point for some people (“I began to think about skills and attitudes needed in language learning”, “The first two sessions were where my attitude change began”).

The most successful aspects of the course mentioned included the freedom and flexibility, being trusted, finding it a better way to learn English, the encouragement of independence and responsibility, increased awareness and the good atmosphere. The least successful (only a few instances) were more to do with the paperwork and schedules, although some people clearly would have preferred more teacher involvement and presence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations met: rated on a scale of 3 (most positive) to 0 (most negative)</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 11. Student evaluations: Question 13. To what extent did the ALMS module meet your expectations?

The final comments were overwhelmingly positive, and several people expressed the wish that this type of course was available in other subjects, and for other language studies. Comments such as “We can learn English anywhere, not only in the classroom”, “I would recommend it to anyone” and “I have learned other skills too” were very rewarding.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, attitudes tend to be stable, but can be changed (Tiffin & McCormick, 1952). It is known that some people respond to any change more positively than others, and there is no reason to doubt that this also applies to attitude change.

Given Little’s (1995) definition of learner autonomy as accepting responsibility for one’s own learning, and his view that autonomous learners can integrate what they learn in a formal context with what they already know, and “transcend the barrier between learning and living” (ibid.), we can assume that changes in students’ thoughts and actions along the autonomy continuum are beneficial. If any such changes can be said to result, if only in part, from a specific course (in this case ALMS), it would seem to point to its success.

The following main conclusions may be drawn from the results of this pilot research project.

As far as the teachers were concerned, changes in attitude seemed to be to do with the acceptance of student responsibility and the loss of their own power and control. This loss is not total, of course, and teachers should avoid adopting an “it’s your problem” approach; they retain responsibility. Most teachers saw ALMS as consistent with their attitudes towards effective learning and their existing feelings about learner-centredness and task-based curricula. These feelings were reinforced, and subsequent discussion suggests that those who embrace the autonomous ideal find it difficult to revert to more teacher-directed courses of study. It should be mentioned that some teachers may take longer to adapt to the new system, and
to decide whether it suits them. The approach does not suit all teachers, and we are not advocating that it should.

For the students, changes in attitude were mostly positive, and sometimes significant. There seems to be a general increase in motivation, a realisation that learning can be fun and useful, and that it is for life and not just for the study weeks. Students realise they have control over what and whether they learn – they cannot blame the teacher, and they do not always need him or her. These attitudes also help in other domains of life. Student use of the vocabulary of autonomy in the interviews and evaluations was interesting: phrases such as “develop my own learning”, “becoming more aware” and “being responsible” were not uncommon.

On the other hand, some students still feel that “traditional” courses (i.e. teacher-led) work best for them. As one of them wrote “I realise that, after all, I do need the teacher”.

In terms of our assumptions, firstly, it seems that the teachers involved in ALMS do reflect on their role, and many express surprise that students do not need to be “taught” all the time. Autonomous learning is regarded as a challenge and as an opportunity for personal development. As expected, people vary in the extent to which they are comfortable with the idea of autonomy, and one went so far as to say, “I think that courses with teacher-produced syllabuses are ineffective . . .”.

Secondly, we may conclude that ALMS is generally a good thing (“A great experience, compared with ‘normal’ language teaching”). The overwhelming majority of students remain positive about it. A recurring comment is that they enjoy being trusted, although surprised by it.

Thirdly, it did turn out that students had varying reasons for doing this module, related to their own circumstances, to the process and to their own learning.

Our fourth assumption is more difficult to evaluate. We did not analyse whether those who said they did ALMS for practical reasons were more positive at the end than other students. There were comments to the effect that, although the amount of commitment involved was more than expected (“hard work, but worth it”), the programme was successful and motivating, which suggests some change in attitude. Statements such as “I realised that learning can be fun and useful” seem to me to show some realisation of responsibility. This is clearly an area worth further investigation.

The fifth assumption was borne out: a significant, if small, number of students consistently mentioned the lack of teacher presence and influence as a negative aspect of the ALMS programme. Relevant comments included, “More counselling/guidance might be helpful” and “It is difficult to know if you’re learning anything because there is no teacher correction”.

For some students, ALMS was clearly a turning point in their attitudes to their own learning and the part they play in it. Of course, this turning point may have been reached in any case, but some student comments suggest that ALMS was the catalyst: “I realise you do not have to be in the classroom to learn”, “I enjoyed English learning for the first time”, “I have noticed the learning opportunities around”. This bears out our sixth assumption, and it would be interesting to develop this area further.

Further research

The aim of this research project was to find out what, if any, changes in attitudes and beliefs teachers and students involved in the ALMS programme were experiencing. We established that attitude change is taking place on several dimensions. More systematic research into attitudes to teaching and learning could fruitfully be conducted, possibly in cooperation with Helsinki University Department of Psychology.

Secondly, there is still a wealth of material produced by students for the ALMS module. Case studies should be made to report the variety of ways in which students choose to fulfil their requirements.

Thirdly, it would be fruitful to investigate the nature and discourse of counselling. The teachers involved in this project
had no previous experience of counselling in this context, and it would be interesting to compare approaches.

Another area for further research would be in the development of learner awareness, or training, and a possible place for it in the university curriculum.

Finally, ways should be found to extend the idea of ALMS to other languages and subjects, preferably in co-operation with other institutions. Sharing experiences and expectations should help those thinking of setting out on the road to autonomy.

APPENDIX 1
TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear ALMS colleagues,

As we are conducting a small research project which involves attitudes/beliefs in teacher-learner relationships, we would like to ask each teacher that has participated in ALMS teaching to help us by filling in the short questionnaire below.

Eight teachers have been involved thus far and we hope to hear from each one. We also ask that each teacher submit their questionnaire anonymously. This allows us to conduct our research without a personal element - after all, we only want the data.

We would appreciate it if you would take the time to reflect on the following questions.

1. What were your reasons for getting involved in ALMS?

2. When you joined, what did you think autonomous learning meant?

3. How about now, what do you think autonomous learning means?


5. Describe your perceptions of the role of a student in autonomous learning.

6. Since joining ALMS, have you noticed any changes in your attitude towards teacher-learner relationships?
APPENDIX 2
STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Date ____________  Counselling session I (with the counsellor)
1. Tell me what your plan is. What targets have you set for yourself?
2. How are you working?: individually pairwork groupwork
3. Why did you choose the ALMS module?
4. What did you expect before coming to the first meeting?
   How about now?

Date ____________  Counselling session II (with a teacher)
5. Tell me how your learning program is developing.
6. Has your original study plan changed? How? Why?
7. How do you feel about learning English?
8. Have your feelings/attitude changed? If so, how?
9. How do you best learn things?
10. What is most difficult in language learning for you? least difficult?

Date ____________  Final counselling session
11. What did you think autonomous learning meant before coming to
   the course?
   What do you think it means now?
12. What do you think the role of the teacher is in learning?
   Have these views changed in this program?
13. Now that you have finished, tell me what kind of language course
   you feel you would learn most from.

CHAPTER FOUR
Student and teacher case studies
Leena Karlsson

Background

In his highly interesting article ‘Redefining the relationship between research and what teachers know’ Donald Freeman discusses the question of teacher research from a fresh point of view. He sees teacher knowledge of teaching/learning as “knowing the story” and researcher knowledge as “knowing how to tell the story”. In the case of the teacher-researcher he sees a unique combination of the two. He points out that when teachers label the disciplined inquiry in their work with the word “research”, this “creates a public framework and means for seeking and sharing interpretations of teaching and learning” (1996). These cases are here to enable other teachers to share the experience: to read and to interpret.

Freeman sees teacher research as a discipline where the research findings may be “stories, narratives, anecdotes, or conversations”. This is very much how I feel about my work in these two case studies: they are stories of the people who went through a development process. My role has been to give a voice to their stories and to try and interpret the development.

With the two cases at hand I wanted to provide a deeper understanding of the individual attitude change and the road towards autonomy (the learning process) in the people who did it: one teacher and a group of students. In the case of the teacher, Kaija, her development as regards attitudes is looked into. She was one of the teachers who were sent a questionnaire as part of the pilot research project reported in Chapter Three. With the second case, a group of five students studying
together inside the ALMS programme, my interest was to see how apparent the different aspects of autonomy became in the light of their learning process. My own role has certainly been other than a detached observer: the cases include my interpretations of the various aspects of the processes described.

A case here is taken to mean the one teacher in the first study and the group of five students in the second. Case studies tell about bounded systems. The system in this instance naturally includes the entire ALMS system, as well as the Language Centre set up. These two stories are meant to be read as part of the whole story about ALMS as described in this book, including the principles behind our project, the way we have organized the modules, what happens inside the skills areas and the research done on attitudes.

The stories are very personal in nature. My intention in writing them was to shed light on the way individuals have experienced the ALMS programme. For Kaija, the time span is really from the beginnings of the programme to the present moment, whereas for the students the study comprises the one term (spring 1995) when they took part in an ALMS course. The reasons for selecting these particular people for the case studies were both practical and personal. Kaija was readily available for interviewing and apart from our joint career as ALMS teachers, I had recently been involved in writing a book with her which made me familiar with her both as a person and a co-action researcher. Also, Kaija has been involved in the ALMS project from the very beginning and thus has a lot of insight into the process. My feeling was that she is confident enough to talk about her true experiences. As for the five students, I was their Faculty Teacher and thus had an opportunity to watch their progress close at hand. They also handed over their beautifully written learning diary at the end of their programme and that provided an excellent source of information for me.

The data collection was different in the two studies. The teacher case is based on interviewing and informal discussions in connection with the development and planning work of the ALMS programme. For the student case I used various existing documents that had been collected as part of the documenta-

tion of the ALMS programme. The teacher interview was semi-structured in that I had an interview guide with open-ended questions written down. But I also asked for additional information and took up points that Kaija mentioned only in passing. Having worked with Kaija in the team of ALMS teachers also meant that I had had various informal discussions with her about different aspects of the programme including our changing attitudes as teachers. In the case of the students I collected as many documents as possible. These included faculty guide books for background information about the students’ subject studies, the student logs, their learning diary, their individual records including counselling notes, drafts for objectives, their final ALMS plans, completion reports and evaluation sheets.

Kaija is certainly a representative case of a Helsinki University Language Centre ALMS teacher. Her background and experience are very similar to that of the rest of the team. Looking at the Finnish scene one can say that her career has features in common with those of most Language Centre teachers. Her development as a teacher in the team certainly has its individual aspects, though those will also become apparent in the course of my work. My second case, the five students, represents a much wider group of people with backgrounds and experiences as students that are much harder to account for. Thus it is very difficult to say if the case is representative even of the students at the University of Helsinki. As such, their story is an interesting example of how students might work their way through a university language course coming out feeling very positive about their learning experience and with improved language skills.
Kaija - an ALMS teacher’s story

Kaija is an experienced English teacher who has worked at the University of Helsinki Language Centre since 1979, which is almost as long as the place has existed. Before that she was teaching English in various secondary schools in the Helsinki area. Kaija is also a qualified piano teacher from the Sibelius Academy. This has given her a splendid advantage when working as an ESP teacher for Sibelius Academy students who do their language studies at the Language Centre: she is a language expert and an expert in music. She also teaches in the University of Art and Design and the faculties of Humanities, Theology and Medicine. A considerable part of her teaching has been in reading comprehension. Furthermore, she has been teaching basic oral skills courses and several elementary courses for the university staff. Kaija’s work as a Language Centre teacher has involved a lot of materials preparation and she has published a collection of reading comprehension materials for students of music and musicology. She has just finished writing an elementary book of English for adults with two of her colleagues. Kaija took part in three SILC modules, one of them on self-access (see Ch. 1).

Kaija has been involved in the ALMs project from the very beginning. She has been involved as a teacher and planner and co-action researcher. Her specific role has been to act as the Faculty Language Teacher for the University of Art and Design. She has been involved in the following support groups: presentation skills, reading skills, reading for writing and practical writing. She was one of the co-writers of the article on the ALMS programme in Liudistuva Korkeakoulutieto (Finnlectura, 1995).

Kaija got involved in the ALMs programme, as she says, by chance. She did not have a dramatic need to change her teaching but she had in fact taken some steps towards a more student-centred approach in her regular courses. In 1993–1994 Kaija took part in the SILC module on self-access (see Ch. 1) and thus one should perhaps look more carefully into her claim that she got involved just by chance. One could argue that an awareness raising had already taken place in her even though she had not consciously acted upon it, and then “chance” brought her into a situation where she could start taking practical measures using the awareness that she already had. “Chance” in her case was when the team of English teachers planned a reorganisation where the teaching of reading and oral skills was integrated. She went through a team teaching experience which had elements of learner-centredness included. After a brief transitional period some English teaching in the University of Industrial Arts was placed inside the ALMS programme and Kaija’s career as an ALMS teacher began. This is actually what often happens with development: there is a certain lag between becoming aware and the actual acting upon that awareness, and very often “chance” has a role to play.

If one compares Kaija’s initial perceptions about autonomy with the perceptions of the rest of the teachers interviewed for our attitudes research (see Ch. 3), it is clear that her development so far consisted of similar elements to the rest of the teachers. She was aware that autonomy had to do with changing teacher/student roles and student responsibility over their own learning. Thus it is evident that she connected autonomy with attitudes rather than mere changes in how to organise learning. However, as with the rest of us, it has been a tricky journey where she has often had to question her behaviour as a teacher because control has always been such a natural part of the teacher’s role, and letting go is very difficult at times. This is especially so as some students still want to be quite dependent and the teacher has to struggle between the new expectations (as other students are very quick to adapt to the situation) and the old ones. During her early career as a Language Centre teacher she believed that the teacher was the source of knowl-
edge (“Kuvittelin, että opettaja on tiedon lähde ja vain niin oppii . . .”), but during the early stages of involvement in the ALMs modules she became convinced of the fact that students can learn without the teacher being present. She saw examples of...
how students took off into projects where teacher contact was minimal but the learning process was controlled and led to very interesting and creative products (see sample in Figure 1).

Looking at herself as a teacher now, she feels that the responsibility should be shared by the teacher and the student and that the teacher should not seek to control the students by using mild measures of persuasion, which is one of the real dangers. Kaija believes that the students are prepared to take the responsibility if it is given to them ("Vastuu otetaan, kun annetaan ja onhan opetusta jossa oma vastuunta"). Kaija’s idea of a teacher could maybe be expressed using the word “consultant” (this was a term used by some of our other respondents, too). She has the idea of the teacher being available to provide input but sees the student as being the one to act on that input ("Opettaja ei voi kaataa oppia opiskelijan päähän. Kyllä opettaja antaa valmiuksia, mutta opiskelija itse työstää"). Kaija remembers a student who did the ALMS programme but, in the final meeting with her as a Faculty Language Teacher, said that the process had really meant “too much work”. The student had said that he would not do it again as all the responsibility was on him and this meant working too hard. Kaija sees the role of the students very much in terms of being active agents who work their way through the learning process, but she is aware of the fact that this is not always what the ALMS students want.

She felt that she had little knowledge of the application of the principles of autonomy ("Omaa ohjausta oisit olla alussa enemmän"). This was for her a problem of “have I changed my approach or am I just having a regular course inside the ALMS programme?”, which I think is very much a problem everyone of us has tackled. ALMS was very much a hands-on job for her as it was for the rest of us. We have simply had to find a way of adapting our teaching behaviour and living with the chaos of change. But, on the other hand, she was able to deal with it because she has such a wide teaching background and could build on a lot of experience. She felt that the beginning for her was a bit unclear also as regards the knowledge and skills required, for example, for some of the support groups (see Ch. 2), which involved input from the teacher in areas of language teaching that she had not been working with inside her regular courses. These included presentation skills and practical writing groups. Nevertheless, joining the team of teachers was easy enough for her as it was a supportive and encouraging group where the chemistries of the people involved mixed well. She sees the importance of teamwork among teachers as an absolute necessity inside ALMS. We do work from the idea of trusting the students and this is perhaps one of the attributes of our teaching team as well: trusting each other.

Kaija has noticed inevitable changes in her other types of courses during the ALMS years. One fundamental insight has been that the idea of autonomy can be applied to elementary groups as well. She has just finished working on an elementary book for adult learners and feels that having worked with the ALMS modules helped her in shaping the book, which is meant for self-study. She thinks that independent and project
work is an essential element of teacher-directed courses as well. There seems to be an element of learner-centredness built into most of her courses these days. As for her piano students she finds herself putting more and more stress on their individual practising. She is not quite sure about any effects on her as a mother, though!

Although Kajja has given up the idea of the obligation to formally test the students, she sometimes has doubts about the way an occasional student might try to come up with evidence of progress. Of course this is one of the elements where the teacher’s control has traditionally been the strongest. She doesn’t see too many problems, though, in reaching the conclusion together with students about satisfactory completion of the modules. As for her other hesitations about the programme she sometimes sees students who just don’t seem to be self-disciplined enough to do the ALMS course. She thinks that a choice of other courses should continue to be offered to the students. There was one student who tried to work inside the ALMS programme but soon felt that she wanted “real teaching”. Kajja’s opinion is that the students who feel this way should be entitled to have a teacher-led course. She also remembers comments from students saying that the teacher should have been present more and she does worry about this herself (“joskus miettiin onko ne heittellä . . .”). Then again she thinks that maybe these were students who should have chosen another type of course. As for institutional limitations, Kajja does not really see many in her situation. The fact that the courses are obligatory (see Ch. 1) is in fact not a real problem regarding autonomy.

What Kajja might do in the future is to try out for herself her developed ideas of the learner’s role: she might have a go at learning Italian, which has been a long-standing interest. She took an elementary course in the Language Centre in 1993 and became aware what hard work learning a new language is. This certainly served as a lesson in the student’s role. Kajja was already involved in ALMS at this stage and, having done this teacher-led course, she felt enthusiastic about doing it the ALMS way.

The students’ story

I The students

In the spring term of 1995, four aspiring ALMS students from the Faculty of Education and one student from the Faculty of Humanities formed an ALMS study group of their own. They were taking part in the ALMS programme to fulfil their oral skills requirement, which meant working for one credit for the education students and for two credits for the humanities student. The education students Hanna, Heikki, Juha and Nina and the humanities student Ina, went through the learner awareness (orientation) session (see Ch. 2) and the second planning session where they decided to form the group. They decided not to join any of the support groups (see Ch. 2) but made a plan for each of the four skill areas that they would carry out on their own. They went away from the second session with a decision to keep a learning diary of the process and a decision to bring various materials for reading, listening and conversation to their next meeting, which would be their first meeting together as an OAG*. They all felt that the OAG seemed promising and also had positive feelings about the awareness session.

II The objectives

The first two sessions of the ALMS programme are where the students plan their programme (see Ch. 2). As for the OAG, the group made a fairly detailed plan for all the four skill areas. Their written objectives were:

1. Oral skills
To improve oral skills (all five students). To trust their own abilities and have the courage to speak (two students added this). The group decided to use conversations about videos, tapes, films, music, interesting issues and books to achieve their objectives. They planned to spend 15 hours on this.

* The abbreviation comes from the words “the story of Our own ALMS Group” which was the title of their learning diary.
2. Writing skills
The OAG set a very specific objective which was to “write questions for other members of the group about tapes that we will listen to”.

3. Reading skills
Again the group stated their objective by specifying what they wanted to do: to read novels, short stories and articles in order to have a conversation with the group.

4. Listening skills
The OAG members decided to use Self Access Studio tapes, films and rock lyrics as their listening materials. One member also mentioned “listening to other members of the group reading” as a possible way of improving her listening skills.

5. Integrated skills
All members had arrows on their paper going from the integrated skills into the four areas above meaning that they saw their programme plans for the four skill areas as forming their integrated project. They said they wanted to meet for 3–4 hours a week (plus do their preparation) to get the 40 hours they needed (except Ina who planned to get her extra 40 hours by adding to the amount of listening, reading and writing on her own).

From the above, one can see that the OAG felt their main objective was to improve their spoken skills and they made all other skills serve this particular purpose. The way the idea of the four skills has been used by the students and ourselves as counsellors and teachers is very general in nature indeed. McDonough (1995) points out that there is no generally accepted or empirically sound analysis of what subskills or component skills actually exist in the cognitive field. The labels oral skills, reading, writing and listening serve as “psychologically valid” ways of talking about the various modes of language performance.

III The ALMS process

On the list of our minimum requirements (see Ch. 2) for the ALMS module we state the few compulsory meetings that the students have to attend. The OAG attended these (learner awareness, planning, meeting with the ALMS counsellor, two meetings with the faculty language teacher and the final group evaluation meeting) but otherwise the teacher contact was zero. They used the Self Access Studio in the Language Centre for listening to a couple of tapes but acted independently of the staff there. They also used at least a couple of articles available amongst the ALMS reading materials but ignored the exercises attached. They had access to the ALMS support materials (listening ideas, reading ideas) but made no reference to these in their logs or diary. Instead of joining any support groups they journeyed through their programme on their own. They used the possibility of meeting in the ALMS room but a lot of their learning/meetings took place outside the “classroom”: in cinemas, cafes and libraries.

They had planned to meet once a week for 3–4 hours and this they actually did. Overleaf is a description of their first OAG meeting on February 2nd, 1995, as it appeared in their diary (Fig. 2).

Their logs contain two types of comments about this meeting: there are comments on the group and how it feels to be working in it, and comments on the language learning experience. Looking at the comments does not give clear information about the kinds of strategies the students might have used, as they often just mention the result: “I learnt a lot of new words”. This is of course a relevant way of showing how they feel this particular language activity contributed to their progress. The entries in their logs have a personal flavour. In all logs one can see an element of reflection becoming stronger as they move towards the end of their course and the reflection seems to be more specific in nature. On the whole, however, the logs seem to be used more as a record of time spent on English whereas the learning diary contains descriptions of the reflective processes: “(…) we discussed (about) the difficulty of understanding the rocklyrics while hearing the song. (…) So we decided to analize a
Everybody thought that it was very difficult, so we decided to analyze a couple of songs. First we listened to the song without looking at the words. It was almost impossible to understand what the song was about. You only could get the feeling out of the song. Again we photocopied the words to everybody and went through the song word by word. It was amazing how much more we could get out of the songs this way!!! Suddenly a nice looking love song turned out to be a horror story of a desperate couple!!

I think that this was a very nice start for our FLHS group!! I was a bit suspicious about the language we would speak during our sessions, but we really spoke in English!! English all the time!

I'm proud of us!!

written by Heana

Our first meeting on the 2nd of February 1995 from 10 pm to 1 pm in the films room

The last time we had met we had agreed on bringing different kinds of materials and ideas with us. Everyone had to come up at least with two different materials or ideas of what we could do during our coming films sessions.

So we went through the materials. Mostly we had written articles, magazines, books, newspapers, CDs, and so on. We chose a couple of articles which we photocopied to everyone. Everybody should read them until the next week and then be able to discuss about those articles. We also agreed that everyone should read one English novel and give the others a presentation of the book during the spring.

John had brought a couple CDs with him. We discussed about the difficulty of understanding the rock-lyrics while hearing the song.
couple of songs. First we listened to the song without looking at the words. It was almost impossible to understand what the song was about. (. . .) Again we fotocopied the words for everybody and went through the song word by word. It was amazing how much more we could get out of the songs this way!!!” Here Hanna is describing a comprehension problem and the way of solving it by using an effective compensation strategy.

The group records that on February 7th at 20.30 the OAG saw the film The Lion King (the original version, without Finnish subtitles) in a local cinema. This was their second meeting. The comments in their logs expressed a positive surprise about having understood almost everything and they felt that watching a film was excellent listening practice and a motivating way of learning English. They decided to see another film at a later stage but were worried about not finding one in an original version (actually they then did find one). Their ALMS session finished at midnight so they also had a good discussion about the film afterwards over a drink! Again, the logs make a reference to the activity and a comment about the result: “It was nice to realise that I could understand the film very well and get into it”. In their learning diary, Hanna reports on the film at length and the others add their personal comments on the film and the language learning experience. These entries are again more reflective in nature and contain the students’ reasoning about why certain things work for them in language learning: “Watching a film in English without Finnish translating is, I believe, excellent listening comprehension. The picture supports the voice and that makes it easier to understand. Another reason to watch a film as a listening comprehension is that you have various kind of pronouncing (slang etc.). While you are only hearing, for example slang, I think it is very difficult to understand but slang with a picture makes it easier”.

Their other group sessions were always based on input material: a tape, an article, or a film. The sessions were very much geared towards giving everybody a chance of saying what they thought about the topic in question. The third group meeting took place on February 15th, 1995. Figure 3 shows an entry in the learning diary for this meeting.

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THE SELF ACCESS STUDIO

ON THE 15TH OF FEBRUARY 1995
FROM 11 AM TO 2 PM

This time we went to the studio to do some listening comprehension. We looked at the tapes under the title “education” and chose a couple of tapes that we listened to. Me and Heikki listened to the same tapes. We both also had the exercises in front of us.

The first text that we listened was called “FINNISH PREJUDGES”. We both thought that it was quite easy. The only difficulty there was, was because of the pronunciation wasn’t that good. He first listened to the text without looking at the written text and then again with the text and questions.

The other text that we listened to was called “BEING A TEACHER”.

They much more difficult than the
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FIGURE 3A. An entry in the learning diary
This time Heikki has added a comment in his log where he comments on the types of activities that seem to work for him: “Discussion sessions are the most useful for me”. In Nina’s log there is a reference to a strategy the group adopted for their listening: “(It was good that we could) hear the stories as many times again as we wanted”. The way the OAG organized their listening session becomes apparent in their learning diary. They were sharing and helping each other out. They divided into pairs and selected one text in common and another one which was different for the pairs. This of course enhanced motivation because there were individual choices built into the situation. The part about the discussion following the listening shows how they were getting to a stage in their learning English where they could forget about the language they used. Certainly English had started becoming part of their identity.

It seems that a certain amount of peer critiquing went on and that the approach in the meetings was to solve the problems as they appeared. During the ALMS programme they each read a novel and presented it to the rest of the group. Their studies in the main subjects also brought additional (individual) elements to the programme: Nina read a book ‘Nationalism’ by Hobsbaum for her history exam, Hanna gave a lecture in English to the Erasmus exchange students, Heikki went to a lecture in the Department of Education called The Future School by a Greek professor, and Juha read a book about gypsies in English for his Master’s thesis and compared it with an article on the same subject in Finnish. Ina, who had to work for 80 hours, did a lot of reading but also went to a seminar on identity, environment and rights of indigenous peoples where she made comparisons of the translations of the Finnish speakers’ presentations into English. The OAG were using their main subject studies to improve their skills in English as well. This element always has an enhancing effect on student motivation.

One difference between today’s language learners and those of former generations is that foreign language contacts are today a natural part of people’s everyday lives. In the case of English in Finland this is undoubtedly true. Apart from
face-to-face contacts with speakers of English there are new technologies which are becoming increasingly available (fax, e-mail, satellites, data-bases, etc.) to learners. Takala (1993) points out that in language learning as in all learning it is essential to offer a large amount of qualitatively high-standard input.

IV Evaluation/achievements

At the end of the programme, ALMS students have their third counselling session with the Faculty Language Teacher to sum up their achievements. They often make this summary by using a completion form (see Ch. 2). On the ALMS completion forms of the OAG the following emerged as achievements:

1. Oral skills
The group members each felt that they had improved their spoken skills. The individual comments were very similar: “I became a better and more sure speaker in English” and “I improved my English and became more encouraged to use it”. Their learning diary also states that as a group they became “more confident with our speaking skills”.

2. Writing
This was an area where the group had set a very specific objective: writing questions for the tapes for other group members to answer. The individual evaluations varied from “no achievement” to “I should have had more practice but we concentrated on three other skills”. The actual writing that they did during their ALMS programme involved taking turns in writing their learning diary and filling in their individual logs. They did write questions for each other according to one member of the group, but all the others ignored it as an achievement. One member, Ina, wrote an essay on her own but fails to comment on the effect on her skills. In their learning diary they write: “We should have done some writing (..), because we have now noticed that there are difficulties in spelling and word order. However, we wanted to concentrate mainly on oral skills”.

3. Reading skills
All students had passed their reading comprehension requirement by being exempted in an initial test. In their objectives they said they wanted to read different materials in order to talk about them. The individual achievements read: “My reading has become better. I don’t stop to think (of) a particular word; I try to understand the whole sentence or larger idea” and “I’m faster and understand better”. The comment related to reading in their learning diary is: “Because we have been reading a lot during the course, our vocabulary has develope”.

4. Listening skills
The completion forms make no mention of their specific objective of listening to rock lyrics although they did this as well. But they all comment on the other work: listening to tapes in the Self Access Studio and their conversations where they got a lot of practice in listening. One member, Nina feels that listening has helped her “remember (..) words that I’ve forgotten”. Heikki makes a comment: “Especially listening skills in ‘spoken’ English has proven a lot. That is because we spoke a lot and it wasn’t all the time very ‘correct’ English but we still could communicate”. The learning diary also says how “through listening (to) tapes, watching videos, having conversations we feel that our listening skills have been getting better”.

5. Integrated skills
The principal objective of the OAG was really to improve their oral skills and they felt, as Juha puts it: “All the skill areas supported the others. I think my integrated skills got better during this course and I am motivated to continue practising”. Nina’s comment is: “In our special group we have been using English in different ways. We have really used English as (..) a way to get along and do whatever. I have even forgotten that I use English, while I’ve been speaking or (???)”.

The last entry in the learning diary consists of two sections: 1. final evaluation of the group and 2. final evaluation of
ALMS. They start the evaluation of the group by saying that they were very pleased with their working methods and motivation. They then present a list (see Figure 4) with positive and negative points about their language skills and objectives (these have been commented on in my previous section):

![FIGURE 4. An entry in the learning diary]

THE LAST MEETING

on the 27th April, 1995

Final evaluation of our group:

+ We were very pleased about our working methods and motivation.
+ We became confident with our speaking skills.
+ Because we have been reading a lot during the course, our vocabulary has developed.
+ Through listening tapes, watching videos, having conversations, we feel that our listening skills have been getting better.
+ The group was well-motivated and our starting level was quite similar.
+ We should have done some writing comprehension, because we have now noticed that there are difficulties in spelling and word order. However, we wanted to concentrate mainly on oral skills.

The OAG evaluates the ALMS programme in a similar way. The positive points centre around the issues of responsibility and student generation of knowledge and language. The other issues are flexibility and motivation. The one negative point concerns the amount of paperwork.

2. Final evaluation of the ALMS

+ We were pleased that we had the possibility to create our own group, which gave us many positive chances: for example...
  - our timetable
  - concentrate on things we were interested in
  - no leader, the responsibility was ours
  - the flexibility to do various things

+ We found out that it is possible and even intentional to create knowledge and skills in English by studying yourselves.
+ Too much paperwork.

SUGGESTION: It would have been better for us to report our work together in this diary, without the lots of paper. Of course, then we should have been more specific about writing it (tenses, placing, activities etc.)
In some of our teachers’ informal discussions I remember that we jokingly referred to the OAG as the “very autonomous group”. In fact, this was a perfectly reasonable way of labelling them as they certainly were “willing to and capable of taking charge of (his/her) own learning” (Holec, 1981). It makes me wonder what these particular students would have done in a strictly teacher-controlled situation. One could maybe argue that for those who are more or less autonomous to start with the obligation to hand over the power and control to the teacher affects their learning in a negative way. Of course, autonomy would help them find their way in a teacher-controlled learning environment as well. Nevertheless, if students are well on their way to autonomy, not organizing the learning environment to suit autonomous students is unjust. I feel that the question of creating an ideal language learning environment for learners with individual needs has been the basis of our ALMS project. And the learning environment that we are now providing certainly covers the needs of students at various stages of autonomy.

The ALMS experience was a process for the OAG as well. The learner awareness session gave them an impetus which they readily responded to. Soon there was a comment in Juha’s log: “This is the right way to study languages”. The OAG reflect on the process in their learning diary: “We found out that it was possible and even intentional to create knowledge and skills in English by students themselves”. This is the summing up at the end for the whole team, but all along their logs contain several comments about how they learnt new ways of solving their learning problems. The one comment with a minus in the learning diary concerned paperwork. The OAG felt that had they only written their diary and not the logs as well they would have been more precise and it would have been better to do all record keeping together. This can be seen as a comment which shows how they knew better at the end of their process: next time this would be an area to be treated differently.

As with all our students, the OAG faced certain limitations to being fully autonomous: they were not doing this purely out of interest and personal learning needs; the course was part of...
their degree requirements. Also, there were the external restraints of the credit system (in Ina's case this meant double the amount of hours to be put into ALMS). For one member, Hanna, there was another time limit (she travelled abroad for a few weeks) which meant she had to finish her individual module work before the others. These limitations were accommodated flexibly into their programme: Ina had plans for herself to continue in a similar line after the others had finished and Hanna was given the opportunity to prepare more for the early meetings.

Hanna talks about how: "It was nice to pick up materials and texts according to our own interest". I have to say that the OAG moved in the new power structure with considerable ease. They did not hesitate to choose the kinds of materials that had an appeal to them. They are referring to the flexibility and the possibility to plan their own timetable as factors that made the programme functional for them. They also mention the fact of having no leader, meaning that the responsibility was theirs. They make no reservations about having had to be in control, although, for many teachers, this certainly is the area that is the toughest. But there simply is no justification for thinking that the students are ignorant of what works for them in language learning; they are the best judges of their own learning.

Thinking of the supportive structures that we feel are essential to autonomy, the OAG seemed to utilize the support given: apart from the awareness and counselling sessions that I have already touched upon, they used our Self Access Studio and the ALMS room for materials and space. In Juha's completion form there is a comment: "I am motivated to continue practising". This could be taken as evidence of a developing capacity to continue learning English with an awareness of different kinds of support available.

The student logs contain various interesting comments which show how the OAG members had the ability to reflect on the learning process: "It's not easy to speak English when all of us (are) Finnish, but I think we manage well". Or: "Not such a(n) excellent session what comes to the English part. But the Finnish discussion was really fruitful". In the second case the OAG had read a text on creativity and then started a discussion on it. Heikki comments: "First it went good but the issue was so interesting that we unfortunately turn(ed) to speak Finnish!". There are more general comments as well: "Our group did work excellently. I believe that is so because we all are very active, social and eager to talk. Our starting level was quite same and because of that no one spoke more than the other".

Learner responsibility includes social aspects: in the case of the OAG there is a lot of evidence about acting responsibly as a team. To take an example from the very beginning of the ALMS process: in the second planning session the OAG decided that they would all bring various materials to their first meeting as a team. The agreement was that everybody would bring at least two different types of materials or learning ideas to the meeting. They obviously had plenty to choose from. And Juha's comment is: "All the members have taken some materials to plan with...". Heikki comments on the meeting: "( . . ) a very good thing, this group work".

The OAG is a very obvious example of how autonomy and learning are not limited to the classroom. They went to watch films together. They took their learning to their departments where they looked for English lectures. The integration of language learning into their subject studies was where the individual aspects of the process became apparent: studying for exams was also looked at as a language learning situation. And the one comment in Nina's completion report about the way the OAG ended up using English in different ways and for different purposes speaks very much for a realization of a foreign language as part of one's identity.

Implications

We in the Language Centre deal with adult learners. Anita Wenden (Wenden and Rubin, 1993) quotes Knowles when putting forward the idea of learning as a life-long process. She refers to Knowles' writings in which he emphasizes the fact that the traditional purpose of education, which was the
transmission of knowledge, is no longer adequate today in our highly technological society. Instead, adults are going to have to face change and for that purpose they will have to have the necessary skills to continue learning on their own, after their formal educational experience. We have been facing this change for a long time as students come to us with very specialized language needs. In the case of English, some might have a fairly good knowledge of the language but their special needs are varied and very often social and personal changes have affected their language skills so that they are now inadequate. The latter is especially true about our mature students, but also with the younger students we often notice a lack of skills in English. More specifically, some students really have difficulties in utilizing their existing skills, which might well have to do with the fact that their experience in learning English has been in environments where form and correctness have been overly emphasized. The effectiveness of this type of an approach is limited and dependent on various factors like learning style, motivation and former language studies (Huttunen 1996).

As teachers, our initial guide to attitude change could be in thinking about the difference between a form-focused and meaning-focused learning environment (Huttunen 1996). In the form-focused environment language as such is the focus, whereas in the meaning-focused environment the entire communicative competence is developed. Huttunen uses Bachman’s definition of communicative competence to highlight the central difference between the two learning environments: she feels that the fact that strategic competence is missing from the form-focused learning environment is critical. The whole field of communication should be included (not only knowledge about language and some of the psychophysical mechanisms). Strategic competence is central in that it includes elements of student evaluation, planning and implementation of their own learning which are necessary for student autonomy, as is the question of learning to learn.

I think that the lesson to be learnt from the positive experience of the OAG is that, by providing the key elements of responsibility, choice and possibility to reflect, we are well on our way to providing a learning environment where our students can be autonomous. Student autonomy inevitably leads to a change in the teacher’s role; one of the aspects of this change is surely a need to reflect on one’s teaching – and on one’s learning. Teachers become co-researchers for their colleagues and co-learners for their students. These are roles where a new attitude becomes necessary. But they are also roles where development and change are key elements.
CHAPTER FIVE

Skills areas in ALMS

Leena Karlsson

Background

Since the setting up of the Helsinki University Language Centre, courses for students wishing to fulfil their compulsory language requirements in English have been traditionally classified as reading comprehension and oral skills. In most faculties, students are required to complete their reading comprehension course requirements before attempting the listening comprehension and oral skills exemption tests, or coming on the courses. The exemption tests vary according to faculty. For reading comprehension, students take a test where they have a choice of academic subject-specific texts with assignments (cloze, comprehension questions, summaries) to be tackled. They are tested on comprehension to assess their abilities in reading for content. Generally speaking, in their oral skills exemption test students listen to an authentic text or texts and are tested on comprehension (there may be other elements to the listening test too); some or all of them are then tested in an oral interview. The criteria are that students should be able to understand and communicate in English in their field on more than a superficial level.

During the past decade, the advent of satellite television, advances in electronic communication and the increase of travel opportunities have contributed to a change in many students’ language attitudes and skills. It seems to us that general listening and casual conversation skills have improved, and many students seem less afraid to use English. On the other hand, needs are changing too. Many more students may now realistically plan a period of study abroad, and that has implications for the kind of courses they might need. For many years, for example, writing as such had no place in our courses; it is now in demand by students, and often inserted into oral skills and reading comprehension courses.

Thus, barriers in terms of “the four language skills” seem to be coming down, or at least to be getting more fuzzy. Nevertheless, we still use the classification with our ALMS students when they are planning their programme, in the full knowledge that their needs usually incorporate the whole range of skills. The learner awareness sessions allow some time for students to do their own needs and skills assessment (see Ch. 2), and also to write down their course objectives in the four skills areas. We have not analysed the specific needs, as expressed by students, although experience and intuition suggest that subject-related reading and discussion, and more casual conversation, are fairly high priorities. In terms of objectives, they write things like: “to improve my English”, “to lose my fear of speaking English”, “to be able to give a presentation in English”, “to learn more vocabulary in my field”, “to improve my pronunciation”, “to learn small talk”, “to improve my conversation skills”, “to get more confidence”, “to read my exam books”, “to learn how to read scientific language”, “to learn to read faster” and “to learn to deal with my sources”.

How the teacher helps

Students meet their personal objectives in a great variety of ways and, as with most autonomous groups, each experience is different. For example, various support groups are offered as options and some general principles behind the “running” of the support groups are presented here. It should be stressed, however, that this is a broad view, that students have the absolute right to run their groups in the way that suits them best, and that teachers offer support in their own way.

In general, teacher/counsellors are available at set times to help any ALMS student or group. Groups that are entirely student-initiated and run have minimal contact with the
teacher outside of the official counselling sessions: it may be just a question of finding rooms, or of making contact with other members of the group. Other groups are assigned to a teacher, who at least calls the first meeting, and often contributes to setting objectives, making plans and organising meetings. The number of teacher contact hours varies, and each group (or the individuals in it) is expected to work independently as agreed among the members. Students have a major say in what goes on in the groups, and in how objectives are achieved. They also have responsibility for their own participation, and while we do not adopt an “it’s your problem” approach if they do not achieve the targets they set in the group, we nevertheless cannot penalise them, or direct them to alternative courses of action. In practice, students who drop out of groups for one reason or another often ask for help in making up their hours, and many teachers bend over backwards to give that help. This is another area where teachers and students are on a voyage of discovery in terms of obligations and responsibilities.

It is true, too, that levels of autonomy vary between and within groups. A teacher “running”, say, two conversation groups might find that the first one takes up more time than expected, while the second one is up and running independently after the first session. Students in a presentation skills group may have differing needs for support in the presentation and feedback process. A social skills group may split in two, and decide to do entirely different things to achieve their objectives. The teacher needs to find a balance - between being too available and not available enough and between being too supportive and not supportive enough.

Individual skills areas

READING SKILLS
Leena Karlsson

Background

Inside the ALMS programme students in the Faculty of Education and the University of Art and Design are able to combine the reading comprehension and oral skills courses and gain all their required credits/study weeks as part of their modules. So far, students of the other faculties which are involved (Humanities, Social Sciences, Maths and Science and Theology) are only able to fulfill the oral skills requirement inside the ALMS modules. Quite a few students in all the faculties have passed their reading comprehension requirement by simply taking a test and being exempted from the course. Some have taken a regular course in English reading comprehension as offered by the Language Centre. Thus, the background of the students as regards their needs for reading is varied. Still, reading is offered to all students as a natural part of the ALMS modules and support groups are available to everybody regardless of their credit needs.

On the whole, students’ needs (no matter what their faculty or reading requirement status) seem to be quite consistent. According to our experience their principal needs are very much inside the ESP area: academic/exam book reading that they have to do for their subject areas. There is also a considerable need for more general reading: literature, newspapers and magazines.

The objectives that the students set for themselves are in line with their needs, i.e., they are concerned with improving their reading for meaning/content skills. Their reading plans are mostly tied together with their exam/course book reading. Indeed, ALMS offers an excellent opportunity for the students to combine their individual reading for their subject studies with their language studies.
How are the objectives achieved?

As the students’ needs mainly lie in the area of course book reading, their individual projects very often concentrate on a certain exam to be passed. They usually include an element of reacting to the reading, which might involve a reading/learning diary, writing summaries of chapters/books or writing an essay on the book. Sometimes they even have a reaction element set by their subject studies lecturers, and they combine this with their language studies. As has been suggested before, we encourage the students to work in pairs/groups/teams, as learning is a social activity. In reading, too, there is always a certain reading community that one belongs to. In ALMS there have been many teams who have organized themselves to work their way through a reading programme, be it reading exam books or preparing a seminar paper in Finnish on the basis of materials in English. Lectures in English and attached reading materials have provided another way of combining ALMS with subject studies.

Some students decide to take part in the workshops/support groups offered. This is then often built into a project along the above lines. Counselling is available to all students by all teachers involved.

Back-up

For the students who feel no need for teacher contact, there is always the possibility to use the ALMS room for their studying and there are reading materials available there. We have compiled a booklet on reading skills and the students are welcome to take a copy of this. The booklet contains ideas about the reading process, reading strategies, textual features typical of English, and ways of exploiting texts. On the shelves of the ALMS room there are also pedagogical faculty-specific materials with self-study assignments and answer keys that are used in our regular reading comprehension courses as well. These are reading materials where the activities are designed to go through the reading process by providing pre-, while- and post-reading assignments. Some commercially available materials are also there and some more are to be acquired. These materials are presented to the students in their second session. The question of authentic materials is still open as we only have occasional newspapers brought by individual teachers. For most students authentic materials of course mean exam/course books and academic articles, and in the future there will be a folder containing student-generated ideas and reading tips for different course books.

The support groups that have been offered so far, Reading I and Reading II, have reflected the student need of reading for learning. In the second ALMS session we suggest that Reading I can, for example, take as its starting point general reading and studying skills. Reading II has developed via a support group which we previously labelled Reading for Writing but now tend to call Reading, Writing and Discussion. For Reading II the suggestion is made that the ways of reacting to reading (writing and discussion) are brought to the fore. Then again, the students are the ones to generate the contents of the support group work, and the two reading groups might end up being very different or quite similar. But there is always a very strong demand for help in attacking the course books and this is almost always one of the features in these workshops.

Interestingly, the traditional approach to reading in English in Finnish schools has been very much in terms of using texts for learning new words and grammar. This, of course, is a very unauthentic reading purpose. University students naturally need reading for learning, which is a totally different context. There are still further contexts for reading, for example reading for pleasure. Often it is the case that students are unaware of the fact that reading can have different purposes. This can sometimes act as an impetus for the reading groups and lead to interesting outcomes.

A special notion behind Reading II (which started as Reading for Writing, as mentioned above) was to give the students the possibility of seeing the links between reading and writing, as activities both having to do with text. For a text to exist, both readers and writers are needed. In fact, with some of the ALMS
students working without joining the support groups, counselling has often meant discussing exactly these issues, i.e. reading purposes and reading/writing relationships, since the problems with reading seem to come from lack of practice in extensive reading and from being unaware of the writer’s role in generating the text.

Counselling has been mentioned in connection with all aspects of the ALMS programme and it certainly has a central role in helping the students with their reading related problems, too. They have the possibility of contacting either their own Faculty Language Teacher, the ALMS Counsellor, or the teacher responsible for the reading support groups. In these particular counselling sessions, the teacher often naturally adopts the role of a learner, as the subject specific texts offer new content to be learnt! Students seem to be naturally inclined to look for ways of exploiting authentic materials in the form of their own course books. In counselling for reading, certain problem areas tend to come up. These concern study skills, differences in academic discourse conventions in Finnish and in English, and reading for meaning in general as an extensive reading activity. Topics for counselling discussions also include reacting to reading in different ways; discussing the links between subject matter reading and the ALMS modules; reading as a social and interpretative activity; linking reading with other skills; listening, writing and oral skills; seeing how the reading purpose really determines the approach to reading tasks; and thinking of reading as an active cognitive process.

LISTENING SKILLS
Felicity Kjisik

Background

Of the four language skills, it seems least reasonable to separate listening skills into an area of its own. However, it is clear that it can be a useful way for the learners to analyse their language in order to assess their needs and plan their programmes. In fact, as we have seen, in most of the support groups and student projects the skills are inevitably integrated, and quite rightly so, as the activities are then closer to reality. In the case of listening skills, the problem is most exaggerated. Apart from listening to the radio, there are not many situations in the real world where we exclusively use our skill of listening.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that listening is not an important part of our language skills. How often do learners discover that, even when they feel they have been progressing well with a new language in the classroom or at home, on arriving in the native country of that language they understand depressingly little of the speech? This discrepancy between textbook and classroom language has been somewhat relieved in recent years by the inclusion in most language learning programmes of tapes and videos. However, in the majority of cases, these recordings are not of authentic speech and so the problem is not entirely solved.

Most students in the ALMS programme clearly feel that they need listening skills. In the Needs Analysis (described in Ch. 2), the majority of students confirm that they need English for listening to lectures and talks, for taking part in conversations, for their entertainment (in the form of TV, films, popular music), for following world news, and for occasionally speaking on the telephone. Most of them see their needs growing in the future.

In order to pinpoint the typical listening problems of Finnish university students, we carried out a small research study in Spring 1994. Students participating in English oral skills cours-
es were asked to describe the main problems they experienced when listening to English, and in particular when listening to tapes in the language laboratory. There were responses from 148 students answering either in Finnish or English.

The largest group of comments concerned specific language difficulties. At least half of the students complained that they lacked the vocabulary. Related to this was the frequent problem that incomprehension of certain words led to a breakdown so that the thread of the discourse was lost. About one third of the students reported that they failed to get the details although they understood the main ideas. A similar number expressed difficulties with the speed and pronunciation of the speakers.

The nature of language lab work and the tasks set caused frequent problems. Many students had difficulties concentrating for long periods, others found the lack of visual feedback a major difficulty. Tasks set were often seen as irrelevant or requiring too detailed responses.

**Students' approaches to listening skills in ALMS**

As described above, most ALMS students unsurprisingly confirm that they have a need for listening skills in English, and, indeed, the majority of students express the improvement of their listening skills as an objective in their contracts. However, their intentions for fulfilling these objectives can be divided into three main groups.

Firstly, many students state in their contracts that they will spend 10-20 hours on listening, either by using the Language Centre Self Access Studio or by listening and viewing elsewhere. In fact, this is borne out by the end-of-term evaluation forms which indicate that an average of 70% of all ALMS students make some use of the Self Access tapes and videos. The amount of time spent and the type of work done with the tapes and videos clearly varies enormously. However, of the students who used Self Access, an average of 68% said that they enjoyed the tapes and gave the following types of positive comments: "It was a fantastic opportunity", "I will continue using the studio", "Good to have tapescripts", "The tapes were interesting". Not all the students were so positive: "Some materials were not interesting", "More up-to-date material would be nice", "I didn't learn much".

A second group of students declare that they intend to improve their listening skills through other means. In general this means that they intend to use films, TV and radio in a conscious effort to develop their skills. Typical comments concerning this are: "I prefer to concentrate on real-life listening" and "You can do the necessary work at home listening to the Voice of America, for example". This approach is understandable when we know how English is so prevalent in the media. Television programmes, for example, are never dubbed and, furthermore, many televisions have the facility to obscure the subtitles. Educational TV programmes, such as Open University series, are also frequently in English, so some students are even able to work on their own degree subject area.

Students are aware that they need to be able to show themselves (and the Counsellors) that they have made some progress with their English when they work on tapes, videos, and with TV and radio. They write notes, summaries, reactions and reviews which they show in the counselling sessions. They also reflect on what they have done and make notes in their LOGs of successful and less successful approaches.

A third group of students decide that they will make no explicit effort to improve their listening skills. Some of these feel that their skills are adequate and they wish to concentrate on other areas. Others feel that they will get enough help with their listening by joining other groups where listening is an integrated part of the activity, such as the various oral skills groups. Indeed, all the awareness sessions, the workshops and support groups, whether they are focused on writing or reading skills, are held in English, so listening skills are constantly in use.

**Support frameworks for listening skills**

Not surprisingly, no support groups are set up explicitly for listening skills. However, quite a lot of ALMS students set up
their own partnerships or small groups which are either partly or wholly intended for working on listening skills. Students may agree to listen to or view specific tapes or videos which they discuss or report on later. We have also asked students to fill in feedback sheets which are left in the ALMS Room for others to consult. The idea is that students may recommend or simply describe tapes and videos which they have found useful, for the benefit of others. However, few students have taken the trouble to do this, probably feeling that it is enough that they help their partners or groups.

As a result of the research described earlier, we prepared some learner support materials for listening, which is distributed to all students at the beginning of the term. The intention, again, is to increase the students’ autonomy in this area. Most listening exercises which students have done previously have been entirely teacher-directed, usually in the form of a tape followed by comprehension questions or tasks, and many of the students express helplessness in terms of knowing how to use a tape or video to improve their language skills. Now that we had a better idea of Finnish students’ particular problems, we felt that we should produce a self-help guide.

Yet again, inspiration for this came from good work done at CRAPEL which was described by Bowden and Moulden in the CRAPEL journal, Mélanges Pédagogiques (1989). They had produced a booklet ‘Listen for Yourself’ (unpublished, but generously made available to us), which also aimed at helping students “to work and improve their comprehension of spoken English in a relatively autonomous way” (my translation). They produced an extensive, 33-page booklet (in French) which included types of listening, strategies of listening, typical comprehension problems, possible solutions to these problems and 36 ways to use recordings.

We decided to follow a similar procedure but to be a little less ambitious. We were partly conscious that our students would not be prepared to read an enormous amount of material, however helpful, especially as it was to be written in English. We came up with seven pages of advice which begin as follows:

 CONTENTS:
A. How to use this booklet
B. The different ways of listening
C. Listening strategies or how to improve your listening skills.
D. Typical problems reported by Finnish students
E. Ways of exploiting listening comprehension material

A. HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is intended to help you improve your skills in listening. It will tell you a little about the types of listening we all do and it will suggest ways that you can practice different strategies when using tapes and videos.

It would be a good idea to read parts B and C of this booklet before you start borrowing and listening to the tapes. It is important to think about your own ways or strategies that you use when you listen as well as deciding what the purpose of your listening is. Before you listen to a tape or watch a video, decide what your aim or objective is with that particular tape. Try to reflect during and after your work on what you are doing, what your problems are and what you have achieved.

It is also important to choose the tape or video carefully. For example, if you want to develop your vocabulary, choose a tape according to the subject matter and think about the language before you start. If you want to pay attention to the details of the language it may be better to choose one where the transcript is available so that you can check your own work or study using the text and the tape. In other words, plan carefully. Think about your problems and your aims and objectives before and after you listen.

In part B we briefly describe global listening, listening for detail and selective listening, followed by general strategies for improving these, and in part D we summarise our research on Finnish students’ problems. In the final part, we offer 17 suggestions for activities with recordings, many of which are applied from the CRAPEL booklet, with grateful acknowledgement. There are activities focused on specific problems, for example:

1. (Vocabulary) Read the transcription before listening to the recording. Look up the words and expressions you do not understand. Listen to the recording, paying particular attention to the pronunciation of the words on your list. Read the transcription again. Listen to the recording again without looking at the transcription.
There are activities focused on prediction, for example:

6. Listen to the first minute of the recording (or more if necessary) and try to guess what will follow. This exercise is particularly good with radio and news programmes. Then listen to the recording to find out what really went on. You may stop the tape every two or three minutes, make new predictions, listen again, and so on until the end.

Some activities aid general understanding, for example:

7. Listen to the recording straight through without stopping at the passages you do not understand. Try to get the gist. Try to guess what you do not understand.

And, finally, there are activities on the comprehension of details, for example:

14. Choose a minute or two of a recording and try to transcribe in English all that you hear. First listen to the entire abstract one or twice to get the gist. Then listen a few words at a time. Listen to bits you do not understand again and again until you do or until boredom sets in. If you are working with others, ask a partner if you could check his/her transcription. Listen to the transcribed extract and note on a separate piece of paper the differences between what you hear and what the other person has written. Finally, give your suggestions for correcting any errors.
15. Choose one minute from a video recording you have not seen before. Look at the extract without the sound. Try to infer as much as you can from what you see. Who are the participants? What is the situation? What are they saying? Look at the extract as many times as you wish. Then check the accuracy of your predictions by turning up the volume.

According to the evaluation forms, an average of 69% of ALMS students claim to have read these support materials for listening and, of these, 64% rated them positively. As yet we have no further detailed information about the efficacy of these materials, nor about how far the students followed the advice. This would be an interesting area for research.

Finally, some words about our Self Access Studio, the types of materials, and how the students access the materials.

Helsinki University Self Access Studio contains approximately 4000 audio tapes and 250 videos which cover about 40 languages. Approximately 18% of these materials are in English. If we follow Little’s classification of self-access materials (1989), we can say that there are back-up documents which help with the use of the Studio and its materials; there are pedagogical documents, including published materials; and there are authentic documents which have not been originally intended for language learning.

The Studio also contains facilities for viewing satellite television and, in addition, there are several computers which contain a relatively small range of CALL programmes, as well as the possibility to use E-mail and the Internet. Students may also print their own work in the Studio.

The area of computer-aided language learning is, as yet, fairly undeveloped in the Language Centre but it is rapidly growing. There is currently a major national project, backed by the Ministry of Education, with the specific aim of developing hypermedia materials for language learning.

Materials in the Self Access Studio are presently being entered into a purpose-made data-base programme (Lab-Lib, University of Turku Language Centre, 1991) which will improve the students’ facility of access. Until this is completed, we try to help students in the ALSM programme by offering them catalogues of the tapes and videos which fall within their faculty subject area. This at least helps them to get started in the Studio, although they are, of course, free to make use of all the materials that there are. Overleaf is an extract from the catalogue for students in the Humanities Faculty.

The catalogue gives information about the source and content of the recording as well as details of any written materials that are available that go with it. The tapescript is usually available, which allows a wide variety of activities to be carried out while listening to a recording. In addition there are often auxiliary materials which the students may choose to use if they wish. Some students clearly find these useful, at least at the beginning, whereas others prefer to devise their own activities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of programme (+ Lablib code)</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation: Forever Green – Can Unspoilt Countries Stay That Way? EN/M SOC 128</td>
<td>BBC Topical Tapes Interviews, 6 mins</td>
<td>The development of transportation in &quot;third-world&quot; countries and the issues of subsequent pollution</td>
<td>Tapescript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Thinking: So You Thought You Could Think EN/HUM 42</td>
<td>4 BBC interviews with Edward de Bono – about 10 mins each</td>
<td>Deals with the restrictions of our normal thinking systems and the advantages of lateral thinking</td>
<td>Tapescripts Pre-listening LC questions Brainstorming, mind maps, word trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural communications</td>
<td>Videoed talk (Grothe)</td>
<td>Deals with living abroad, cultural differences etc.</td>
<td>Warm-up, viewing and discussion questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression: Sick or sad? A Guide to Depression. I, II EN/PSY 2</td>
<td>Set of 4 interviews, about 10 mins each</td>
<td>The interviews cover general depression, and depression among adolescents, women and the elderly</td>
<td>Tapescript Summary questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression: Winter Blues – or Seasonal Affective Disorder? EN/M MED 82</td>
<td>BBC Topical Tapes Your World 06/91</td>
<td>The depression that affects some people in the winter is now an officially recognised case for treatment</td>
<td>Tapescript Summary questions Discussion points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Extract from the video and tape catalogue for Humanities students

*Implications and conclusions*

Listening skills are clearly integrated into many of the activities that ALMS students participate in. However, there is considerable opportunity for them to work specifically on their listening skills in the Self Access studio and, indeed, most of the them make the most of this. One of the side benefits of this is that students are made aware of the existence of the Self Access Studio and will, hopefully, continue to make use of it during the remainder of their university studies. In addition, the skills they learn in terms of working with tapes and videos autonomously will also hold them in good stead in the future, even outside the Self Access Studio.
ORAL SKILLS
Joan Nordlund

Achievement of Objectives

The “silent Finn” is a myth that can become reality for various reasons, to varying degrees, on a traditional oral skills course. Students have different educational backgrounds, different levels of skills, different personalities, and different expectations and needs. The ALMS programme offers them the opportunity to plan their oral skills development taking into account these individual differences.

Students begin to reflect on their specific language needs, and to set preliminary objectives, in the first six-hour awareness session. We give them some information about the kinds of support groups that have been set up before, and encourage them to suggest others, and indeed to set up their own. The groups tend to reflect some of the general objectives mentioned previously. To cater for the various degrees of “wanting to improve my conversation skills”, we have suggested groups of varying levels of formality, from the very free-and-easy discussion club, open to all-comers, to the slightly more structured conversation and so-called social skills groups. There is no clear dividing line between these groups; students may express the need to “learn small talk”, which would suggest a social skills group, but may turn out that what they really want to do is to talk in general.

The groups are often very mixed by faculty and level of ability. Most students seem to enjoy talking to people studying in different areas, but the mixed-ability aspect has sometimes been mentioned in feedback as a negative point; those with less ability may feel intimidated by the others and may withdraw from the conversation, and this may be seen as lack of interest and involvement by others in the group. Those with more ability have sometimes expressed frustration that they are “being held back”. On the other hand, some less able students have done nothing but gain from being in a group in which they felt they had no alternative but to cope, and the more able have enjoyed their contributions and personalities.

Many students, once they realise that it is acceptable and even encouraged, set up their own conversation groups. There seems to be this tendency among some education and humanities students, who have set up subject-specific discussion groups that meet regularly. In Autumn, 1996, we have an art appreciation group and a church-going group, both consisting largely of theology students. Another new departure this term is a singing group!

There is usually some demand for presentation skills, or seminar skills, with participants expressing the wish to “be able to speak in public”, “be able to talk about my subject”, and even “to be forced to give a presentation”.

Drama groups have been proposed as an oral skills option in the first awareness sessions, and there have usually been enough students who have been brave enough to take it. Drama can be used to improve fluency, pronunciation and articulation, among other things.

Student-initiated groups have included translation and grammar groups, and an Amnesty International group, which together contacted Amnesty and wrote letters. Many people have also carried out their own projects, especially those who live outside of Helsinki, or who have family and/or work commitments that prevent them from joining “regular” groups. Two students carried on telephone correspondence throughout the term and others have initiated discussion with visiting lecturers and students.

I will now turn to some of the groups themselves, and briefly describe how they may operate. I will mention the discussion club, conversation, social skills, presentation skills and drama groups.

The Discussion Club is held weekly. A teacher is assigned to the group, but spends most of the time out of the discussion arena. The idea is that this is a very informal forum, open to anyone who might like to pop in at any time. Some students attend weekly, and others come once or twice. Foreign students have come along, and the room is sometimes buzzing
with excitement. There is no limit to the number of participants.

Conversation groups usually consist of between six and fifteen students, and often split into smaller groups if one group is unmanageable. If I am responsible for such a group, I might attend three or four meetings. In the first one we discuss aims and meeting times, and usually go through some aspects of what is required for a conversation group to work. We may then do some "exercises" aimed at getting conversation going. I ask each student to choose a topic for next time, and to prepare a 10-minute discussion about it. These discussions usually take up the whole of the following session, and frequently only a few people's topics are covered, thus providing a good starting point for the following meetings. I may then pop into one or two of the sessions throughout the term, and always try to attend the last one as a fellow conversationalist. Students are asked to fill in a conversation group report after each session (See Figure 1).

The Social Skills groups vary very much according to the students and teacher. Some students want to "learn small talk", while others have a broader perspective and suggest role play activities and social gatherings. Some teachers have good ideas about what could be done in the group, and students are often only too pleased to follow the teacher's suggestions. We have discussed whether such an apparently teacher-directed approach contradicts the ideals of autonomy. If students choose that approach, do we have the right to say, "This is not the idea", however much we may question their motives for the choice? Students have said to me that it is easier for them if someone else decides! However, some Social Skills groups have worked very well, and autonomously, with the teacher helping in planning, finding rooms and by giving moral support.

So far, several Presentation Skills groups have been organised each term. The first sessions usually involve finding out people's needs and wants, and establishing a programme and fixing meeting times. I have been responsible for several of these groups, and they all evolve in different ways. Sometimes

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**PREPARATION**

**PERSONAL PERFORMANCE**

Strengths

Weaknesses

**GROUP DYNAMICS**

**TOPIC AND CONTENT OF DISCUSSION**

Please attach any preparatory materials

FIGURE 1. Conversation Group Report
students want to work up gradually to giving a fairly formal presentation on some aspect of their studies, and to concentrate on this throughout. Others see more benefit in giving two or three shorter, less formal speeches on various topics, and to incorporate other activities such as debating and more formal discussion. Some students are very happy to work without teacher involvement, and others request help and feedback. The role of the teacher here is thus often to effect compromises to suit all participants – both in terms of content and meeting times. Probably the most typical format I have worked with is to spend the first meeting of 2-3 hours discussing organisational aspects and presentations in general. For the next two-hour session, students might prepare a short five-minute presentation which they give to the whole group, and on which they receive feedback. They then also decide on their topics for longer presentations at a “Workshop Session”, and how they are going to prepare for this. I might arrange individual sessions with those who want help or feedback. The Workshop Session usually lasts three to four hours, and often takes the form of a tutorial.

The Drama Groups have been my particular joy. Only a few students have been involved each term until now (Autumn 1996), when we have over twenty, forming three distinct groups. These are interesting in that they reflect levels of autonomy: one group is working on improvisations, another has found and amended their own text which they are working on independently, and the third group chose texts from ones supplied by me, which we are working on together. The objective, so far, has been to perform something in English. The teacher offers language help when necessary, and practical help with finding rooms, staging and organising the performance, which has been given at the final Discussion Club session of the term (see poster, Figure 2).

These descriptions of some of the oral skills support groups should give some idea of how they work, and of how the teacher helps. I will now look at these groups in terms of achievements, from both teacher and student perspectives.

ALMS DRAMA ALMS DRAMA

PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH

by

THE ALMS DRAMA TEAM

Thursday 7 December

1500 hrs

in the VIDEO room
2nd floor, Fabianinkatu 26

“The Lighter Side of Chekhov”

“A Bird’s Eye View of Pinter”

This will take place as the final discussion club session of the term.

Please come along and bring your friends.

Free entrance!!

FIGURE 2. Drama Poster, December 1995
Achievements

Students complete course evaluation forms during their final ALMS sessions, and these give us valuable information about the success or otherwise of various groups. We also get information during the various counselling sessions, from the group reports and logs, and in discussion with our fellow teachers. My views on achievements in the oral skills area are based on all these sources, but necessarily remain subjective.

In general, students are very positive about their achievements in ALMS, and in the oral skills elements. Comments such as “I don’t have to be in the classroom to learn”, “Learning can be fun and useful”, “I can do it!” and “It was good to talk to students from other faculties” are very encouraging. Students also often say that they have overcome their fear of speaking in a group, or in public, and that they realise that they are able to function and to learn without the teacher being there.

Perceptions about the success of various groups vary. The conversation groups seem to work very well, on the whole. It sometimes takes a while for students to realise that they are in charge, and that the teacher will not come bursting in to demand feedback. It has to be said, too, that some groups split up, or do not continue for various reasons, and some students are thus dissatisfied with their achievements. Reasons for dissatisfaction have included varying language skills of the participants, domination by a particular student, difficulties in organising meetings and, interestingly, “boring topics”. The Presentation Skills groups also work well for those who persevere with them. Students often say they hate doing presentations, but they know it is good for them. Some even find the experience a positive one! Those who use the group to practise a presentation they need to make in another context perhaps get the most from it, although increased confidence and language practice in general are frequently mentioned. Again, the Social Skills groups vary in levels of achievement. Many groups work very well and, again, attract positive general feedback. There have been problems in getting stu-
dents to set goals and make plans, too. One student comment I quote with mixed feelings was “I liked this group because JN didn’t make me talk” . . .

Students who participate in the drama groups seem to enjoy the experience, and the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Several participants have had very weak language skills, have taken short roles and really worked hard to learn the lines, act the character and perform the part. They often worry about it, and do not believe they will succeed, but are really pleased when they do. Other students have been surprised that they could learn quite long parts, and perform in English. They have also enjoyed staging the pieces and negotiating with one another and with me. One student went on to join the Finn-Brit Players, and to take a speaking role in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”.

In conclusion, it seems that the majority of students sense an improvement in their oral skills after the ALMS programme, according to their evaluation comments. They say they enjoy feeling more confident, and are motivated by the freedom to choose their topics and methods, and by the trust that is placed in them. Particularly positive comments have been made by people running their own subject-specific groups.
WRITING SKILLS
Leena Karlsson

Background

Writing skills are now very much in demand by students in the Language Centre and ALMS students are no exception. They are aware of the need to improve their skills in various types of writing in English and most students include some writing in their ALMS programme. As has been mentioned before, writing as such has not been a part of the language centre courses although this is changing. At school, most students have had eight to ten years of English but few have had training in writing (in any language!). The type of writing in English that the students have encountered has been in the form of compositions on set topics, with little connection to the other language skills, e.g. reading.

Student needs for writing are often expressed in terms of outcomes: letters and CVs are frequently asked for. Some students express a need for more academic writing (essays, Master’s thesis, research papers) as they feel that this is an area where they have no experience whatsoever but where their future needs might well lie. Students have also expressed the desire to develop their writing skills in areas like poetry and literature. Again, as with the other skills, there seems to be a natural tendency to integrate the writing activities with the rest of the ALMS programme. As all the documentation and record keeping by the students is done in English, there is always an element of writing built in the ALMS process.

As for support, we have offered workshops/support groups that reflect the needs expressed by the students. For Writing I, “Practical Writing”, we suggest that the possible shape for the workshop might have to do with various practical outcomes such as CVs. For Writing II, “Academic Writing”, in general, the suggestion is made that outcomes for the workshop will be in the area of academic prose. It should be stressed once more that the way these groups are run in reality depends on the

My first poem maybe the last

Tonight I want to make a poem.
Just a little one.
Small, rather small.
No, very small poem.
Quickly and briefly.
A slight one.
A short poem.
Baby poem.
The miniature.

No, less. Even a smaller poem.
My own tiny poem.
The smallest.

Well, nothing.

Today I have to make a poem.
It is going to be a big one.
Just great.
Really huge.
Very long and extensive.
It’s a large one.

No more. Bigger, enormous poem.
Maybe world wide.
The greatest.
Giant.

And then.
Then I will read it to everybody.
And everybody will laugh at me.

FIGURE 1. A product of the creative writing group
students themselves and also on the individual teachers. The support materials in the ALMS room are again a source that the students can make use of. These include materials on: process writing (including areas on editing, revision and peer critiquing); practical writing (letters, curriculum vitae, journal writing, review writing); academic writing (essays, research papers and reports, abstracts, documentation, outlining and summarizing); and written communication (cultural aspects, genre, cohesion).

A creative writing support group has been offered only once so far. The enthusiasm was great and some of the outcomes extremely interesting. One of these products is printed in Figure 1.

For all support groups, peer critiquing is encouraged and the idea of using fellow students as sources of inspiration and partners in need is suggested often in the first or second session. Writing clinics are still to be developed. Counselling for writing is available in the same way as it is for all other support groups or students working on their own.

Achievements and conclusions

Writing has not traditionally been part of the English courses which students attend as a requirement of their degree. However, there has recently been a growing demand for skills such as academic writing, letter writing and summary writing. Many ALMS students, when evaluating their programmes, state that they should have included more writing in their programme. Others make the point that writing is naturally integrated into the process in the form of reports, log and diary writing, summaries of reading material and so on.

The need for writing has been reflected in the number of support groups that have been offered. In addition to the ones that have been described above there have also been groups working on grammar, translation, newsletters and Amnesty which have all involved writing.

On the whole the student evaluations of the writing groups have been positive. However, one consistent problem has been the issue of teacher feedback. Many students express the desire for detailed feedback and error correction by the teacher. Some of the students seem to expect the ALMS office to offer a free revision service. While we try to satisfy the students’ needs as far as possible, individual feedback can be very time consuming and involve a lot of individual teacher contact. Various alternative approaches have been tried, including peer critiquing, partnerships and writing clinics, but with variable success. There is continuous discussion amongst the teachers concerning these issues and new approaches are tested each term. No doubt this experimentation will continue.

Finally, as an illustration of how one of the most popular writing support groups is run, there will follow a detailed account of an academic writing workshop, written by Diane Pilkinton-Pihko.
The road to my Academic Workshop was not a straight one. It could not be, not with all the considerations that needed to be addressed. This workshop arose from wishes expressed by students, students who were motivated to develop their skills in English by writing essays, research papers, or reports. Here, I will briefly summarize the operations and the main principles that establish an autonomous setting in this workshop.

In thinking about how to operate this workshop series, I found myself obsessed with two questions: How can I provide learners with practice in self-direction? And, what degree of learner-directedness should I implement?

What I decided on was a teacher/learner-directed approach. In this dual approach the learner training aspect is preplanned and partly teacher-directed. By that I mean that the teacher makes explicit the underlying strategies to be practiced in different tasks. It is learner-directed in the sense that the learner decides which strategies to adopt or reject. The focus is on “process”, both a learning process and a writing process. Within these processes, learners are in a position to make informed choices about their own learning and choose according to their own preferences. This approach approximates the “freestyle” approach as exemplified in Ellis and Sinclair (1989). In the writing activities, learners are encouraged to try new strategies and to determine how well they work for them. In this way the writing activities incorporate reflection and experimentation. Moreover, this working mode offers flexibility.

Some of the ideas implemented in the design of this workshop follow a hypothesis put forward by Nunan (1995): “the gap between teaching and learning will be narrowed when learners are given a more active role in the three key domains of content, process, and language”. Although the ideas underlying this workshop align with Nunan’s hypothesis, the workshops have not been set up as formal experiments to test the hypothesis.

To create an environment which allows learners to have a more active role in the key domain areas, I favor an inductive approach. This approach allows a teacher to gain understanding of what learners already know and for learners to gain understanding of principles presented in tasks and discussions. The mode of the workshops varies, i.e., discussion, instruction, and activities.

To ensure that learners do not feel overwhelmed by too much responsibility too soon, they gradually take on more responsibility in the three key domains. This idea is partly reflected in the dual aims of each workshop, one set focusing on language learning (language domain) and the other on the learning process (learning domain). The content domain is mainly specified by the learners, who select their own topics and provide content. What I am trying to develop is the learner’s ability to assume responsibility for his/her own learning in the context of writing.

**Background of the students**

Most of the students have studied eight to ten years of English and few have had training in writing (in any language). A mixture of faculties (Humanities, Social Sciences, and Helsinki University of Art and Design) have been represented at each workshop series.

Some of the motivations that have driven learners to request an Academic Writing workshop are (1) they are in the process of writing their thesis or final work in English; (2) they plan to write their thesis or final work in English; or (3) they recognize their future needs for written English. All these reasons are linked to specific goals involving personal development.

**How learners achieve their objectives**

Some learners aim to revise their thesis or final work, others aim to find out how to write a thesis in English, and the rest have more general aims. Because of the length and depth of a Master’s thesis or final work, I encourage students to aim at
developing their written skills by working on shorter pieces. Some students then choose to write a summary of their thesis as their essay for the workshop, and others try to handle one aspect of their thesis in an essay or simply choose a topic which they find interesting.

In the workshops, learners work through activities designed to raise learner awareness and their knowledge of written English. That entails trying different techniques and strategies and deciding what best suits their learning style as well as producing an essay. I use a form of process writing as a means to encourage learner interaction and networking.

Upon the completion of their essays, learners have the option to start another writing project, but without workshops. They decide what their project will be, set specific goals and objectives for it, deadlines, and consult with me. They also determine the mode in which they will work. Some continue to meet weekly with other learners to write, share their writing and do peer critiques; some work alone and contact their peers for revisions; a few feel the need for a teacher and visit her weekly during the consultation time; and others find they do not have time for another project once they have completed the workshops. This is part of the flexibility of an autonomous program. Learners choose the working mode that best suits them. In addition, learners decide how much time they will spend on improving some aspect of their English and how much emphasis they will put on a specific area such as writing. In this way, learners are able to achieve their personal objectives.

How the teacher helps the learners

There are at least four ways in which I try to help the learners. One way is by providing materials of different types. I have developed learner support materials for writing and collected pedagogical and authentic documents. The learner support materials provide information on various ways to approach materials, ways to improve, and ideas for projects. The pedagogical materials include published materials as well as teacher-made or adapted materials. Authentic documents are materials of any kind which were not originally made for language teaching, such as magazines, journals, etc. All of these materials are available to all learners. Another way that I assist ALMs learners is by serving as a counsellor (helper, knower, facilitator, advisor), and a support in the process of self-development. For that purpose, I hold weekly consultation hours. Learners are invited to call or to visit freely and by appointment. A third way that I assist learners is by helping them find other learners to work with. Writers need readers - the two go hand in hand. And being an autonomous learner does not necessarily mean working alone. To enhance networking, I post information in the ALMs room on students who are in a writing support group. A fourth way in which I help learners is by providing workshops designed to support learning. In the workshops learners are exposed to approaches to writing, language and language learning, assisted with learning plans and diaries, and self-evaluation.

My Academic Writing workshop consists of five two-hour sessions. The aim of the first session is to make evident the overall goals and content of the workshops, and to assess the starting points of the students. The aim of the second session is to raise learner awareness of certain aspects of the essay, such as large scale organization (language domain) and to put metacognitive strategies (learning domain), like centering your learning, to work. The aim of the third session is to engage students in making decisions (learning domain) about what they want to learn (language and content domains). In the fourth session learners are guided through peer critiques where they try different communicative and cognitive strategies as well as metacognitive strategies. The fifth session focuses on guiding learners through self-editing. This session involves monitoring and evaluating one's own learning. In this final workshop, students also discuss any writing projects with which they plan to continue.
Implications and conclusions

I have attempted to provide an environment which methodologically and psychologically supports autonomous learners. Why I believe it is important to provide such an environment stems from my background with self-access type courses and with independent study. My early experiences with learners working on their own allowed me to see the wide range of skills that different students have in that situation. And in the case of the self-access type courses, I realized one of the biggest mistakes was to assume that learners would become independent learners by using a self-access centre. I also realized that courses requiring autonomy were not for everyone and that many of my students did not seem to know what to do even though I thought I had given them clear instructions.

In my pre-ALMs days, I thought I could help learners to learn and to be autonomous by giving an assignment which would require them to use some of the self-access resources. I would help them by showing the resources available and by giving assistance in selecting materials appropriate for their levels. Sometimes I also suggested various techniques that the learners could practice. That approach took for granted that learners knew what they wanted to learn and how to go about it. Since then, I have realized that learners may not know what their options are, e.g. for language learning, and what to do. And those who do not know what to do or how to do it will find working in a self-access type environment to be a frustrating experience. In my early attempts to produce autonomous learners, I had not realized those limitations.

On the methodological side, the framework for my Academic Writing workshop derives from Nunan (1995). It is designed to give learners an active role in the three domain areas of content, process and language. What follows is my own variation of how to implement such an idea. In order to develop a learner’s ability to assume responsibility, a learner gradually takes on a more active role in each of the three domains. From the onset learners select the content for their writing activities, the language domain moves from teacher-
selected to learner-selected, and the learning process incorpo-
rates the following pattern throughout the sessions: Reflection
(raising awareness) – Experimentation (try a new strategy) –
Reflection (self-assessment). The reason for giving learners
responsibility for the content domain from the onset is to offer
them the possibility to concentrate on their specialty areas
(English for Specific Purposes).

Figure 1 presents a diagram of the gradual increase in
learner responsibility in each of the three key domains as
carried out in my Academic Writing workshop.

Learning is gradual. It takes place in stages and in steps. This
framework offers one way of helping learners learn to manage
their learning.

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