«From Here to Autonomy»: Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS)

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Introduction

This paper describes the Autonomous Learning Project we have introduced at Helsinki University Language Centre. When I say «we», I am including my two close colleagues, Leena Karlsson and Felicity Kjisik. The project began in 1994, and has developed very much as teamwork. We have jointly authored a book about it, «From Here to Autonomy» (Karlsson, Kjisik & Nordlund, 1997), and have published numerous conference papers and reports. Leena is currently working on her Licentiate thesis (Karlsson, in progress), and I am indebted to her for sifting through some of the latest literature and discussion on autonomy.

Today's topics:

- Theoretical background
- The ALMS programme
- Supporting the learner
- Research

I will begin by giving some theoretical background and sharing some of our ideas about autonomy in language learning. I will then describe the ALMS programme and how it fits into our university context. We place a lot of emphasis on supporting the learner, and I will look at this in a little more detail. Finally, I will describe some of the research we have done.

Autonomous learning — some theoretical insights

Two classic definitions of autonomy influenced us a lot when we set up our programme. The first was put forward by Henri Holec in 1981, and the second by David Little in 1991.

Definitions of Autonomy

«Learner autonomy is when the learner is willing and capable of taking charge of his/her own learning». The learner should be capable of «determining the objectives; defining the contents and the progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition...; evaluating what has been acquired».

Henri Holec (1981)

«Autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning».

Little (1991)

It is clear from this that autonomy is not a method of language learning - it is a capacity. This seems to distinguish it from some other types of learning with which it is sometimes associated. As we see it:

Self study (or self access) may refer to part of a course or the whole course. The teacher is usually responsible for materials and evaluation, and the course is largely teacher-controlled. There is little emphasis on study skills, and oral skills are rarely included.

Negotiated courses imply shared responsibility for content, materials and evaluation. Emphasis is placed on student needs, and the teacher is seen as an organiser, a resource bank and an advisor.

Distance learning is generally teacher-controlled and evaluated, although there may be some element of choice of materials. There is intermittent communication between teacher and learner, and the teacher is regarded as a tutor.

Independent learning implies freedom from control by and dependence on others.

Autonomous learning presupposes student control, joint responsibility for evaluation, and an emphasis on learner awareness. The teacher is seen as a counsellor and a resource.

The main point here is that most of these can be seen as ways of *organising* learning, as methods. They may be more or less teacher-led and the degree of teacher control is not clear. We, like Holec and his colleagues at CRAPEL, use the term «autonomy» to refer to a «capacity» and not a «method». It is a capacity that (usually) needs to be acquired, hence our emphasis on «learning how to learn». Once students recognise that they have control, they may choose

how they learn: they may choose self-study, or they may not. We are thus trying to promote autonomous systems that help our learners to develop their potential for taking control of every stage of their learning, from setting objectives, making plans, carrying them out and evaluating themselves.

In our work and study in this field we have come across the following ten aspects of autonomy, which we have found to suit our own perceptions and beliefs.

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 that may help learners to learn how to learn. Much has been done in the area of learner training — or learner development and awareness. We are thinking about the process that the learner goes through when he or she learns how to learn. There is a wealth of material on learning strategies and styles, and it is to the concepts that we like to introduce our students. We do not pretend that there is one set of strategies for all people at all times. As Steven McDonough (1995) writes:

> «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».
>
> Steven McDonough (1995)

We feel justified in devoting teacher time to fostering students' awareness. We encourage them to use their own experiences of language learning and, indeed, their own exposure to language teaching. Above all, we would like them to start to trust their own abilities to analyse problems, set objectives, make plans and to 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 proved to be an even harder task. Learner autonomy cannot be achieved without teacher autonomy, and teaching is no longer (if it ever was) a matter of transferring knowledge into an empty vessel.

2. The road to autonomy is a process

People have sometimes been surprised at the amount of support we give to, and contact we have with, our students — who are «supposed to be autonomous». We have to assume that few students who come to us do not need any help (although there are some). The majority have not been accustomed to making choices and taking responsibility in their education so far. We feel they benefit from our awareness sessions, from the counselling, and from the other support that

is available. We aim to offer choice, and we recognise that the process of adaptation is not necessarily easy or fast.

3. The state of autonomy is essentially unstable

The degree of autonomy varies in one individual and between individuals according to a number of factors. These include the type of task involved, personal attitudes and motivation, mood, personal history and also their history as language learners. Students must be allowed the freedom to choose their level of dependence in different situations. Similarly there may be external constraints on the level of autonomy that is allowable.

4. Autonomy inevitably involves a change in power relationships

Any changes in terms of responsibility and decision making are directly concerned with the power relationships in the classroom. Students in traditional educational settings have been used to an unbalanced power relationship, with little say in what, how, when or even why they learn. Of course, ultimately, it is the learner's choice, conscious or otherwise, whether or not to learn at all. Assessment, however, 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. It has to be said, too, 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. We are working within a larger structure, be it the university or our society, and there is only a certain amount of power that can be handed over to the student. In some societies the implications of power exchange may be much greater.

5. Autonomy requires supportive structures, both internal and external

Teachers can only provide circumstances, frameworks and structures that 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, and by setting up support groups and networks, we are providing an external framework that we hope will lead to internal development. Indeed, the proximity of a good self-access centre with a wide range of materials and technology is a vital part of our support system. After all, we are intending to empower our students with this capacity for learning for life, not just for the extent of the module.

6. Autonomy requires a conscious awareness of the learning process

We believe that language skills can best be developed if the learner develops awareness of his or her own learning, and of the strategies and styles that are

available. Strategic competence means being able to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate one's learning, and making use of all available opportunities both in and outside the classroom. This implies the need for continuous reflection. We encourage this through the use of counselling sessions and logs or learner diaries.

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 stressing the need for interaction and negotiation. Leni Dam, for example, stresses the social dimension:

> «Learner autonomy is characterised 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».
>
> (Dam, 1995)

We encourage students to form groups and networks, and to use peer evaluation. They often happily discuss together (even without the teacher), they write to and for each other, they exchange and share academic texts, and they even listen and watch together.

8. Autonomy is not limited to the classroom

An important part of language-learning awareness is the admission that a lot of learning goes on outside the classroom, and that this is positive. Students are frequently initially surprised when we stress the importance of making use of the outside world during the ALMS module. We encourage the use of the English that is in the environment (and there is plenty of English in the Helsinki environment). We also urge our learners 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 mentioned earlier.

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 successfully applied and adopted in a wide range of cultures. This 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 many students in the ALMS programme have experienced surprisingly

little difficulty in adapting to the new culture. Studies have indicated that Finnish society as a whole places high value on the concepts of intellectual autonomy, responsibility and freedom. This could explain why our ALMS students feel comfortable in the new context, and why they frequently express the wish to study other languages and subjects autonomously.

10. Autonomy is closely related to social identity

Finally, it seems to us that autonomy is not simply a method of language learning, but it has much deeper implications for the identity of the individual. Henri Holec and David Little, again, are worth quoting.

> 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».
>
> Holec (1981)

> «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».
>
> David Little (1996)

These views have been reinforced by some of our students who have said that their ALMS experience has affected their attitude to studying, and even to life in general.

David Little has also been adamant about what autonomy is **not**.

> **What Autonomy is not**
> Autonomy is **not** self-instruction or learning without a teacher.
> It does **not** mean that intervention or initiative on the part of the teacher is banned.
> It is **not** something that teachers **do** to learners.
> It is **not** one, easily identifiable type of behaviour.
> It is **not** a steady state reached by learners for all time.

We are firm believers that autonomous learning can be developed in almost any context and with any type of learner, but the context and culture have to be taken into account. Learners will need more or less help and more or less material support.

The role of the teacher

There are many myths that prevail in language teaching. One is the idea that the teacher is the source of all knowledge, the omniscient and omnipotent expert, the

near-native speaker who has control over the language and the culture. Many teachers and learners are more than happy to cling to this myth. With freedom comes responsibility, and as Dickinson (1995) suggested, this duality might explain the ambivalence that exists about accepting responsibility for one's learning. Learners have to confront their weaknesses and failures. On the other hand, through taking responsibility they assume control, which in turn enhances self-esteem.

The power to make decisions about goals, to organise and evaluate learning, has been the teacher's. Those committed to learner autonomy question this, and rather see themselves as supporters of the whole process of learning, which may mean planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating, but which inevitably involves the learner. This changing teacher role is the subject of much debate, and indeed was the topic of recent on-line discussion in the AUTO-L forum (Crabbe, 2000). David Crabbe suggested that teachers should not only provide autonomous learners with opportunities, but also provide for their uptake and use. To foster autonomy, they should give learners the opportunity to discuss their aims, to discuss case studies that show how others achieve their language-learning goals, and to get positive feedback on their own strategic behaviour. The opportunities referred to involve collaboration, motivation, decision making, reflection and knowledge.

The role of education

It has been said that education (and particularly further education) *should foster the learner's capacity for independent thinking and responsibility*. Learners need to plan their learning, and to do this they need to be aware of their abilities and needs. They also need to be able to reflect about their needs and experiences. Reflection at all stages of the learning process helps to transform plans into action. Evaluation and reflection go hand in hand, and Leni Dam (1995) has argued that evaluation is «*the pivot of learner autonomy*». Evaluating the learning of a foreign language involves two dimensions, the «how» in terms of achieving goals and monitoring the learning programme, and the «what» in terms of acquiring the skills. It has been suggested (Little, 1995) that learners find it easier to evaluate the «how», but they need more help with the «what».

The ALMS modules

Background

All Finnish universities have a Language Centre whose purpose is to provide specialist language teaching to students in all faculties and departments. All university students are required to study a foreign language as part of their degree.

The Faculties set the minimum requirements (in terms of credits) and the Language Centre provides a variety of courses to fulfil them. The vast majority of students choose English, as this is a continuation of their school studies. We do not teach English philology, rather English for specific and academic purposes. Helsinki University Language Centre serves a university of about 20 000 students. It employs around 100 teachers of which about a quarter teach English.

Finland is officially a bilingual country — Finnish and Swedish being the two native languages. Finnish is a language spoken by only around five million people. English is very evident in the community and especially in the media. Many Finnish TV programmes are British or American, and they are broadcast in the original language, with subtitles rather than dubbing. The same is true of the cinema. In schools over 90% of pupils choose English as their first foreign language and study it for ten years. For many students, a large proportion of their academic reading is in English, as is much of the research that is conducted. Finnish students are increasingly taking courses of study in English and are taking advantage of opportunities to study abroad. There is also a growing trend towards writing Master's and doctoral theses in English. On the whole, our students are highly motivated to learn English and have already achieved quite a high level by the end of their school careers.

The first Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) at Helsinki University Language Centre were offered in autumn 1994. These modules are alternatives to more traditional, faculty-specific, teacher-led courses, and so far concern the fulfilment of the foreign-language requirement in student degrees. The modules are worth from one to four credits, depending on the Faculty. One credit represents 40 hours of student work. In spring 2001, we are dealing with students from the Faculties of Humanities, Theology, Social Science, Agriculture and Forestry and Education, and from the University of Art and Design and the Sibelius Academy — about 200 students all together. We keep the faculties apart administratively, but there is a lot of cross-faculty interaction in the support groups.

For us, these modules seemed to be a natural development of the communicative and learner-centred approach we adopted in any case. This meant perceiving students as thinking human beings with different needs, skills and motivations. It also increasingly means giving them more control over what, when, how and where they learn. We retain responsibility for the results, which in our context means the awarding of credits.

Student motivation is a crucial element in their learning. It is widely accepted in the business world that people who freely commit themselves to a course of action are considered more likely to have the motivation to follow it through. A student who plays a meaningful role in his or her own learning may be expected to have a vested interest in a successful outcome.

We had more concrete motivations too. Helsinki University like many others has been faced with demands for more effective, flexible and economical teaching programmes. The Language Centre was under pressure to integrate language

studies more closely with students' main degree studies, which seemed to us to be a positive development. What was less positive was the pressure to produce more credits for fewer contact hours. Our aim was to develop a system that would satisfy both of these demands and, above all, give the students the capacity for language learning for life. Language Centre courses are inevitably short, and it seems sensible to provide students with the motivation and skills to continue learning.

The Framework of the ALMS programme

The ALMS programme has five main features, which we categorise as Learner awareness, Plans and contracts, Skill support groups, Counselling, and Record keeping and Evaluation.

A. Learner awareness

This is one of the few compulsory requirements of the module. We feel that students should understand what we are trying to achieve, what is meant by autonomy, how to operate within the ALMS system and, finally, how to plan and organise their own programme: in other words, we are aiming to create an autonomous learning environment.

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

- Reflections about language learning
- Consciousness-raising of language-learning strategies
- Analysis of students' own strategies
- Analysis of language needs, present and future
- The students' own objectives
- Self evaluation
- Making preliminary plans and thinking about areas of interest.

First, we introduce 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 often a novel one.

We then spend time raising awareness of learning strategies and of reflection and evaluation. We ask students to think of themselves as language learners — they are after all experts. They fill in and discuss a language-learning questionnaire.

The next activity is an information-sharing and reporting task to encourage reflection of the use of coping strategies. The students are given 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. 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?

We use three or four articles in a class of 20 students, and the students who are reporting the contents of the clippings build up the picture together. The teacher writes on an overhead slide any issues that arise that are to do with learning strategies. Quickly the overhead fills up with comments such as :

«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 made a mind map.»
«I was nervous about reporting to the class.»
«I tried to get the main points.»
«I ignored what I didn't know.»
«I tried to get the idea from the picture and the headline.»
«I remembered reading about this in the newspaper.»

Inevitably, we end up with reference to most of the strategies that have been documented, and students begin to be aware of their own strategies.

We use Rebecca Oxford's SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) (Oxford, 1990) as an example. The students go on to complete this inventory to see what their strategy profile looks like. The intention is not to train them to develop specific strategies, nor to suggest that there are right and wrong ones. This is an awareness-raising exercise to help them to reflect on their own learning, and to open their eyes to the possibility of regulating their strategy use if they want to. They draw up their own strategy profile — which is referred to again in the final group session.

At this point, the students are ready to begin to focus on their own needs. They need help with this, and we give them a form covering general skills and specific needs and circumstances, plus a column for assessing their proficiency in these areas. They fill in this form, and make a «wish list» of how they could begin to meet their needs within the context of the ALMS programme.

The last thing we do before asking them to make some preliminary plans is to discuss the process of self-evaluation. This is a new area for many, and it has been one thing that we know some students have found difficult from the feedback

we have received. Students are used to being tested, and to being told by teachers how good their skills are. We thus try to make sure that they understand the concept, and that they can do some self-evaluation in practice, by asking them to evaluate certain aspects of their learning and certain language-learning activities. We may show examples from student logs, or from the final evaluation form. The students then go away for a week to reflect about their areas of interest.

B. Plans and contracts

The following week, the students go on to make firm plans. They write «contracts» and they may sign up for various support groups. They form their own groups and partnerships, and describe individual projects they plan to do. They set their own objectives and plan for their fulfilment. Practical issues including offering listening and reading guides, finding materials and using the Language Centre Self-Access studio are also dealt with.

C. Skill support groups

We encourage students to join some support groups, and to set up their own. The 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 of the groups have more teacher presence and influence than others, and the teacher's role varies very much. They are set up in accordance with student wishes and teacher resources.

Skill support groups
1. ORAL
- presentation skills
- cross-cultural communication
- academic discussion/conversation
- students' own groups (films, art, church, education, psychology)
- drama

2. WRITING
- practical writing (letters, C.V.s)
- academic writing (essays, papers)
- creative writing
- writing for reflection

3. READING
- general reading skills
- reading, writing, discussion

4. OTHERS
- Amnesty group
- computer-aided language learning

D. Counselling

Counselling is provided as a support to the students and a check on their progress. Each student has a minimum of three individual counselling sessions, at the beginning, middle and end of the programme. This is discussed in more detail later.

E. Record keeping and evaluation

Date and time	Place	Activity/materials	Language focus	Evaluation

The basis of the students' record keeping is usually the ALMS LOG, which has to be kept up-to-date with everything they do towards their objectives. There are other forms of record keeping, and some students keep their own diaries. Recently we have put more emphasis on self-reflection and evaluation, since this seemed to be where some students needed help. We also added a «Language focus» column to make it clearer for those who combine their subject studies with their English studies.

In a final (compulsory) group session, language-learning strategies are re-assessed and students complete a course-evaluation form. The idea is for them to reflect on what they have been doing. They re-do the strategy profile and compare it with the first one. The two are often similar, although there seems to be consistent «improvement» in, or increased use of, many of the strategies, particularly social strategies, overcoming limitations and managing emotions.

Learner Support

I will now turn to the issue of learner support, which is fundamental to our programme.

HELPING THE INDEPENDENT LEARNER		
peer suport	learner training/awareness	records
	The learner	
support groups		teachers/counsellors
diaries, journals		self-access centres
	the world outside	

It is our firm belief that learner independence does not mean that the learner is alone and without support. Our support systems include the training or aware-

ness raising that is done, the organisation of (teacher-guided) groups of people working towards common goals, the provision of self-access study facilities and materials, the encouragement of peer support, the record keeping, diary writing and counselling. Neither should we forget the world around — TV and radio, films, clubs and associations and so on. We are lucky in Helsinki to be able to exploit an abundance of English.

Counselling

Counselling is a crucial part of this support network, and it was the area that was new for most teachers. The model we have developed was influenced very much by what has been going on in CRAPEL, at the Université de Nancy II in France, for many years. Three functions of counselling were put forward by Gremmo (1994), and these seem to apply to our situation.

1. Counsellors provide **conceptual information** to help learners to develop their representations and metalinguistic and metacognitive notions.
2. They give **methodological information** about materials and work techniques and planning.
3. They provide **psychological support** and help learners to come to terms with successes and failures.

The role of the counsellor clearly differs in some respects from that of the teacher. According to Riley (1997), teaching and counselling involve different things. For example, teaching is to do with setting objectives, determining course content, selecting materials, deciding on the learning tasks, initiating and managing classroom interaction, answering questions, marking and grading, testing and motivating. Counselling, on the other hand, involves eliciting information about aims, needs and wishes, helping with planning, suggesting materials and sources, taking part in interaction, offering alternatives, listening and responding, interpreting information, giving feedback on self-assessment, and being positive and supportive.

If only it were this simple! Clearly, many of the roles overlap, many teachers are counsellors at heart and vice versa: there are elements of advising, suggesting, and supporting in much of the «teaching» that goes on. «Counsellor» may not be the best term here, but it is the one we settled for.

Why do we counsel?

It is not only the terminology that poses problems. The very nature of counselling, advising, helping, call it what you will, somehow contradicts the princi-

ples of independence and autonomy. Helping learners is not just a matter of pointing them in the right direction — it is also to do with motivation and behaviour, with practical and emotional support. It is therefore invasive. Can we counsel without touching on motives, personality and values? Are we teaching by the back door? Does it matter? What is the purpose? Does the counsellor know best?

What is involved?

As we see it, the counselling role involves helping the learner to learn (implying raising awareness about representations, beliefs and attitudes), helping the learner to learn X and helping the learner to learn X independently. Whereas teaching is said to involve matters of decision, counselling involves suggestion and negotiation. It has also been said that advising, or counselling, involves the ability to suggest rather than prescribe. This is not to say that teaching excludes these things. For us, two functions of counselling seem to emerge: these are to do with the process of helping the learner to learn, and the product — helping the learner to learn X. These have been called psychological and technical levels.

How do we do it?

Our counselling sessions are one-on-one, as private as possible, and usually in English. Most students see two counsellors — what we call the ALMS Counsellor and the Faculty Counsellor. The counsellor should analyse what the learner says, and give information and psychological support. This could be called the process level. Interaction between counsellor and learner should also involve asking questions, giving advice (as an expert) and making suggestions — the product if you like. Students could be prompted by asking them **why** they chose a particular task or activity, **how** they went about it, **how well** they did it, what **problems** they had and why, and what they planed to do next. The question remains as to who controls the interaction.

This, then, is our counselling framework.

Process: The ALMS Counsellor (AC)

Counselling: Process and Product
Process: The ALMS Counsellor (AC)
* learner awareness session
* first counselling session
  • Do students understand the process?
  • Are they are aware of their responsibilities?
  • Have they set up their learning programme?
  • How are they evaluating their learning?

*final group session:
  • How have students managed with their programme?
  • How have their attitudes to learning and strategies changed?
  • How autonomous do they feel?
  • How effective has the programme been?

The ALMS counsellor runs the first, six-hour learner-awareness session, where the focus is very much on the process of independent learning. Then the students have a one-on-one meeting with him or her early in the term. The main purposes are to check that they understand the process and that they are aware of their responsibilities. These include setting up their learning programme and being able to evaluate their progress. The AC runs the final group session in which, once again, the focus is on the process and on the students' experiences and attitudes.

Product: The Faculty Counsellor (FC)

Counselling: Process and product
Product: Faculty Counsellor (FAC)
* Administrative responsibility
* Second awareness session (plans and support)
* Mid-term counselling meeting
  • How are you progressing with your studies?
  • What changes, if any, have you made to your plan?
  • Please give one or two concrete examples of how your English has improved.
  • How have you been evaluating your learning?
  • How do you see yourself now as a language learner? What, if any, changes have you noticed since you started your programme?
* Final counselling session with completed logs

The Faculty Counsellor is more responsible for the product. He or she has administrative responsibility for the students in the particular faculty, which includes awarding the credits and maintaining the records. The FC runs the second «awareness» session, during which the students get down to planning their learning programmes, and arranges two counselling meetings during the term. The first of these may be conducted by e-mail, in which case the students are asked to respond at some depth to certain questions.

The purpose of these meetings is to check that students are on track, that they are not leaving everything to the last minute, and that they are interpreting the autonomy concept in a practical way (for our context). Students may ask for help in achieving certain goals. They may have encountered problems with timetables, or they may have found out that their original plan is not working, or they may have run out of ideas: the counsellor is there to help and to guide, but not to prescribe.

Students see their FC for the final time when they have completed their programme. They bring their logs and records, and the other products of their learning. We have had some amazing things — very personal diaries, poetry, costume designs. Normally, the material includes film and book summaries, listening-comprehension and grammar exercises, learning diaries, conversation-group reports and the like. It is the counsellor's job to assess whether this amount of production is enough to earn the credits.

Student reactions

> **Student Reactions to ALMS**
> «My whole attitude to English has changed»
> «This course was a kick to my ass»
> «I did more work than on a normal course»

We were encouraged by comments such as these made by students at the end of the modules. Perhaps we were surprised ourselves about the popularity of the ALMS project from the very beginning — as expressed verbally by students in the counselling sessions and backed up by the evaluation forms. After all, we had to deal with our own uncertainty and the teacher's new role. There is very little advice anywhere on the nature and practice of being a «counsellor», for example, so we had to find our own way. Feedback from the students continues to be extremely positive, with many of them expressing a change in attitude towards language learning, an increase in motivation and strong feelings of individual responsibility.

ALMS Action Research

Evidence of change in the learner

«From Here to Autonomy»

The positive reactions put us on the road to action research. We noticed that the ease of adaptation to the new roles varied, among both teachers and learners. We felt encouraged to investigate certain aspects of the programme further. We wanted to find out just what it was that was changing. Was it simply the increased flexibility, the mixture of faculties or the novelty, or was it something deeper? We were also interested in what was happening to the teacher. Our first action research project therefore concerned changes in attitude among teachers and learners. We teachers were struggling with our new roles, and the learners were adapting to their new freedom and responsibility. As far as the teachers were concerned, on the whole, the anxieties they had felt about losing control and decision-making pow-

er were allayed during the programme as they discovered that learner participation and initiation is potentially effective. However, it clearly does not suit all teachers and again there is variation in adaptation to the change. Our findings regarding our learners confirmed what we had gathered from student feedback. This research led to our book «From Here to Autonomy», and to further action-research projects in the areas of counselling and student self-evaluation.

Student self-evaluation

All of our research has been carried out by working teachers, in the context of their everyday duties. We have kept careful records and encouraged students to reflect and report on their learning, which means that we have plenty of material to analyse. We have used learner logs, transcripts of some counselling sessions, e-mail counselling and end-of-module evaluations. We constantly discuss our experiences among ourselves and with the other ALMS teachers. Here are just a few examples of reactions that we have found interesting.

> **From the LOGS**
> «….noticing mistakes made by myself.»
> «It went well — learned a lot about conversation.»
> «I was more interested in the articles than the linguistics.»
> «I notice my auditive discrimination has become better.»
> «I notice I can evaluate my English skills myself.»
> «I understand the main things, the idea».
> «A good way to learn English in a real situation.»
> «I've definitely improved with writing e-mail messages.»
> «I enjoy speaking English in my group.»
> «I have started thinking in English.»

Transcripts of counselling sessions

As part of our research on the content and nature of counselling we videotaped and transcribed a large number of counselling sessions. There was plenty of evidence of conscious change as is clear from the following extracts. Each of these cases shows students deliberately and consciously putting themselves in situations where they will be obliged to practice their English. Most students freely admitted that they had previously effectively avoided such situations for fear of embarrassment.

> **Evidence of Change (1)**
> **Counsellor:** How do you see yourself now as a language learner? Or have any beliefs about yourself changed?

Student: Yes. Erm, I was very surprised that I can speak. I have always thought that I couldn't do it, and we had Mary Reid from London, who wanted to see our kindergarten, and my colleagues said no, no, no, not any Marys here, but I promised to, to introduce our kindergarten to her and we have a long discussion of our Finnish day care, yes.

Evidence of Change (2)
Counsellor: Well, is there something that you feel that you have learnt as a learner in a different way than for example before, during this autumn?
Student: Well more, probably more active: I mean, I notice everywhere I hear or read something in English language, then I notice it more, or try to get more use of it...

Evidence of Change (3)
Counsellor: What about, if you think of yourself as a language learner, have your beliefs, your ideas about yourself changed at all during this programme?
Student: Yes, I have begun to trust more and more. In our day care centre we have one daddy, papa, he's from Greece, and he speaks English and he came one morning and he tried to speak Finnish to me, and I said you can speak English to me, and I was very amazed and after that I started to believe in myself.

Email counselling

Another source of material was students' e-mails. One advantage of these is that whilst there are questions given for guidance, the learners are not prompted in the same way that they might be in a face-to-face counselling situation. Here are some examples of what they have written.

E-mail Counselling (1)
3. Please give one or two concrete examples of how your English has improved.
   * Maybe I haven't learnt that much new words, but it has become easier for me to find the words I knew from the beginning... I mean that I am not that nervous anymore.
   * My reading has become more fluent — I need a dictionary less than before thanks to my own vocabulary list.

E-mail counselling (2)
4. How have you been evaluating your learning?
   * I haven't done any systematic evaluating if that's what you mean. But being able to use words that I haven't known before has given hints to me that something has happened.
   * Self-evaluation is becoming a natural part of learning, and it increases my motivation to learn more.

E-mail Counselling (3)

5. How do you see yourself now as a language learner? What, if any, changes have you noticed since you started the programme?

  * Before this programme I didn't see myself as a language learner at all. I was just a simple user of one of the foreign languages known to me. Now — consciously or unconsciously — I try to get into situations where I have a possibility to use my language and maybe to improve it in some way.
  * I see myself as a language learner who has got going. I have got self-confidence and feel myself no more as a hopeless case.

What these seem to show is consistent and sometimes substantial change in attitude towards studying English and towards students' own production of the language. We categorised these reactions as follows.

Types of Change
- A general improvement in motivation
- The discovery that learning can be fun and useful
- The realisation that they are empowered for life not just for the length of the course
- The realisation that they themselves have control over what and whether they learn (they cannot blame the teacher)
- This growth in awareness also affects other domains in life

Research on counselling

Our counselling framework has remained more or less the same since we started the project. We now feel we have the experience to reflect on what an «ideal» counsellor might be — an expert on the language and the learning process, on teaching/counselling methodology and on the subject in question. We decided to take a deeper look at our counselling process. We did this for two main reasons. The first was theoretical, involving our own beliefs about our roles as counsellors, and our commitment to motivating and supporting the students in their learning. The second reason was empirical: student evaluations are consistently largely positive about the counselling and its value, but a handful of learners have felt that it could be more effective. Our first research project in this area, which we carried out three years ago, focused on the role of the counsellor. How much should counsellors talk? How can they be encouraged to elicit information and reflection from the learner? How far should they be making suggestions? How much support and encouragement should they give?

We videotaped, transcribed and analysed a number of counselling sessions.

Interaction in Counselling

A. The Counsellor Eliciting Information B. The Counsellor Encouraging the learner

Checking the process   Reassuring
Asking questions: Suggesting
statements
closed questions   C. The Learner talking about Learning
open-ended questions
unfinished questions
double / multiple questions

Three types of interaction seemed to emerge, involving the counsellor elicit-
ing information and encouraging the learner, and the student talking about learn-
ing. Differences and trends were apparent in the kinds of question the counsel-
lor asked and the amount of encouragement he or she gave, in the amount and
ratio of counsellor and learner talk, and in the amount of checking and sugges-
tion. There was also variation in the extent and ways of offering support and en-
couragement, and in how much the learner volunteered information and took part
in the interaction. Further and ongoing research is concentrating again on the
way the counsellor fulfils the role. As one contributor to the AUTO-L discussion
said, we are looking to be «the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage»!

Evaluation and assessment in an autonomous setting

Our colleagues who are sceptical of our autonomous approach to language learn-
ing frequently ask us, «What about assessment?» We have all been using con-
tinuous assessment for our courses for many years now, and we see no great
leap from that to discussing with our autonomous students the work they have
done and what they have learned. Students are often their own harshest critics.

In settings such as ours where autonomy is a goal, learners should know
how to manage their learning process, and assessing their progress is intrinsic
to this. Our emphasis on self-evaluation is in line with some of what Kohonen
says about authentic assessment:

> **Authentic Assessment**
> • assessment is an integral part of instruction
> • each learner is treated as a unique person
> • the emphasis is on what the learner **can** do (better)
> • it encourages collaborative learning and comparison with past performance.
>   Kohonen (1998)

Given our definition of autonomy as a capacity to be developed, it is impor-
tant for us to support learners in their search for ways of evaluating themselves.

Their immediate reaction to being asked to do so in the learner-awareness session is often a variant of «I can't». It has always been the job and responsibility of somebody else. We believe that the capacity continuously to monitor and evaluate pushes learning forwards in a cyclic action. New insights about learning may arise and old ones may be confirmed, and all this feeds into the learning process. This, again, begs the question of power and control.

Limitations and living with them

The institutional constraints within which we are working include:
• The compulsory nature of the courses. The very fact that these courses are a compulsory requirement for Finnish students flies in the face of our principles of autonomy.

Such institutional constraints in turn have an effect on:
• Group sizes (not everybody can get on an autonomy module even if they choose to).
• The time limits (courses are scheduled to last one term).
• credit allowance. Inevitably students count the number of hours they need to put into the autonomous module in the knowledge that they can gain only a certain number of credits. This rather hinders the approach we encourage, namely, of setting goals and objectives and setting out to attain them.
• Teachers' contracts. University teachers have a certain number of teaching hours written into their contracts, and it is not easy to predict the number of teacher hours that will be needed. The question also arises whether counselling hours can be calculated in the same way as group teaching hours.
• Resources. In a public institution like a university there are always spatial and financial constraints.

Having said all that, we are aware of the advantages of working in higher education. First and foremost, this is an academic environment and, in our case at least, that means considerable freedom to experiment and develop. We are lucky to have motivated and willing students. Without the co-operation of them and our fellow ALMS teachers, none of our research would have been possible. Without the co-operation of our Director, from whom we receive tremendous encouragement, and the Chancellor of Helsinki University, from whom we have received financial support, the entire project would not have happened.