



Encouraging L2 Learner Autonomy

Empowering Learners for the Real World

January 9, 2026 | Jessica Caplice | ELL educator | MA TESOL

autonomy: (noun)

1. a state of independence and self-determination in an individual, a group, or a society.
2. in self-determination theory more specifically, the experience of acting from choice, rather than feeling pressured to act. This form of autonomy is considered a fundamental psychological need that predicts well-being.

-American Psychological Association



Why is autonomy important for language learning?

The background of the slide is white with abstract blue geometric shapes on the right side. These shapes include overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of blue, from light sky blue to dark navy blue. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement.

The importance of autonomy in language learners

- ▶ **Promotes lifelong learning**
Learners continue studying outside the classroom.
- ▶ **Encourages real-world language use**
Helps learners practice their L2 in daily life.
- ▶ **Builds motivation**
Taking control increases interest and commitment.
- ▶ **Improves learning strategies**
Learners understand how they learn best.



The importance of autonomy in language learner

- ▶ **Boosts confidence**

Learners feel more capable and willing to speak.

- ▶ **Supports goal-setting**

Learners can set personal goals and track progress.

- ▶ **Fits busy adult lives**

Autonomy allows flexible, self-paced learning.





Breakout Room 1

- share a time when you felt "pressured to act" vs. having "choice".
- How often do you find opportunities to give your students choices in their learning?

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How Can Teachers Support Learner Autonomy?

- ❑ stay up to date on pedagogical approaches to support learners
- ❑ provide learners with choice and personalization
- ❑ help students develop learning strategies
- ❑ guide students in purposeful use of technology to increase language acquisition
- ❑ provide low-anxiety classrooms with regular feedback and opportunities for self-assessment



Breakout Room 2

- Review the list of strategies teachers can use to encourage learner autonomy.
- Discuss which you find hardest to implement and brainstorm solutions.

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Sample Lesson Plan

Implementing research strategies to encourage learner autonomy

Polite Language for Sensitive Topics

B2 Upper Intermediate

Objective:	Learn to use euphemisms for sensitive conversation topics in American English.
Can do:	At the end of the lesson, students can use common euphemisms in place of harsher-sounding words in polite conversations about uncomfortable topics.

Personal reflection gives learners a sense of ownership of the content, recalling personal experiences and sharing their opinions.

WARM-UP

Which of these topics do you find most awkward to talk about? Rank them from 1 to 5 (1 = most awkward, 5 = least awkward). Then, compare with a partner.

- When someone loses her/his job
- When someone dies
- When someone has a medical problem
- When someone has gained weight
- How much money people earn



students infer meaning from context → discovery and learning

PRE-READING

1. Skim the conversation 1. Match words and phrases 1-9 to their meanings A-I
2. Skim conversation 2 and check your answers

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. between jobs | A. alcohol |
| 2. let go | B. died |
| 3. creative differences | C. fatter |
| 4. passed away | D. fired/terminated |
| 5. over the hill | E. old |
| 6. expecting | F. opposing ideas and disagreements |
| 7. heavier | G. pregnant |
| 8. restroom | H. toilet |
| 9. adult beverages | I. unemployed |

The teacher facilitates rather than directs every moment of learning.

READING

Read the two conversations aloud with a partner and answer the questions:

- Which conversation uses language that sounds more direct?
- Which sounds more indirect? Why might we sometimes use more indirect language?

Conversation 1

Jenn: Hey, have you heard about Lisa? She's been **between jobs** for a while now.

Emily: Oh, really? I had no idea. What happened?

Jenn: Well, she was **let go** last month. Her company's blaming it on budget cuts, but I heard that she and her boss had some **creative differences**.

Emily: What a tough time for her! Did you hear that her uncle **passed away** recently?

Jenn: Yeah, I did. It's so sad. He was **over the hill**, but it's never easy to lose a loved one.

Emily: In other news, did you know that Jane is **expecting** again?

Jenn: No way, really? That's great news for her. I thought she'd been looking a little **heavier** lately.

Emily: Yeah, she's glowing. By the way, I'll be right back; I need to use the **restroom**.

[After Emily returns]

Jenn: Hey! I was thinking, since it's Friday, maybe we could all go out for some **adult beverages** after work.

Emily: That sounds like a great idea. I need to unwind a bit.

Conversation 2

Jenn: Hey, have you heard about Lisa? She's been **unemployed** for a while now.

Emily: Oh, really? I had no idea. What happened?

Jenn: Well, she was **fired** last month. Her company is blaming it on budget cuts, but I heard that she and her boss had some **opposing ideas and disagreements**.

Emily: What a tough time for her! Did you hear that her uncle **died** recently?

Jenn: Yeah, I did. It's so sad. He was **old**, but it's never easy to lose a loved one.

Emily: In other news, did you know that Jane is **pregnant** again?

Jenn: No way, really? That's great news for her. I thought she'd been looking a little **fatter** lately.

Emily: Yeah, she's glowing. By the way, I'll be right back; I need to use the **toilet**.

[After Emily returns]

Jenn: Hey! I was thinking, since it's Friday, maybe we could all go out for some **alcohol** after work.

Emily: That sounds like a great idea. I need to unwind a bit.

Authentic communicative practice supports the development of autonomy by building learners' confidence to use language beyond the classroom.

PRACTICE

1. Complete the questions below with the highlighted euphemisms from conversation 1.

1. At what age should it be legal to consume _____? Why?
2. How are _____ mothers celebrated in your culture?
3. Why might an employee be _____?
4. Should students ask permission to use the _____ during class? Why?
5. When are professional athletes considered _____? Is this fair?
6. What's the best way to support a friend when a family member has _____?
7. What's the best way to network when **between jobs**?
8. What recipes or activities would you suggest for a friend who's worried that they've gotten too _____?
9. Have you ever had to navigate _____ with a project partner or colleague? How did you handle it?

2. In pairs, ask and answer the questions.

Roleplay provides communicative practice with choice and opportunity for self-expression.

ROLEPLAY

In pairs, choose a situation below. Act out the roleplay using appropriate euphemisms.

1	Speaker A: You are interviewing a new employee. You have some concerns about speaker B's resumé.	Speaker B: You are interviewing for a new job. You have been unemployed for two years.
2	Speaker A: You are at an office holiday party. You know that your friend and workmate, Rachel is pregnant, but she is not ready to announce it to everyone yet. You promised not to tell anyone.	Speaker B: You are at an office holiday party. You notice that your colleague, Rachel looks ill. She has gained weight and is going to the bathroom often. You are worried about her. Discuss your concerns with speaker A.
3	Speaker A: You are the CEO of a financially struggling company. You meet with your general manager to discuss laying off 3-5 employees to save the company money.	Speaker B: You are the general manager of a struggling company. The CEO has asked you to think of 3-5 employees to lay off. Meet with the CEO and share the employees you've chosen to lay off and why.
4	Speaker A: You are a high school counselor. A student comes to your office to discuss some family problems. Listen to speaker B, show sensitivity, and offer some advice.	Speaker B: You are a high school student who is having some family problems. Discuss these sensitive issues with your counselor.

This lesson uses reflection and self-assessment checklists to promote autonomy and confidence.

I can understand new words and phrases through context.



I can identify the use of euphemisms in English.



I can politely discuss sensitive or embarrassing topics.



Reflect: What helped you learn today? What will you do next time to understand polite English better? Write one communication skill you'd like to improve in English. How can you practice it outside class?

Reflecting encourages independence and personal accountability, while feedback and checklists support self-monitoring and increase speaking confidence.



Breakout Room 3

- Review the lesson plan
- Brainstorm how to increase learner choice
- Create a plan to ensure the autonomy built in this lesson lasts after the class ends

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Conclusion

- ❑ Learner autonomy is essential for long-term success, motivation, and confidence in L2 learners.
- ❑ Research supports strategies like reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting to foster autonomy.
- ❑ Teachers play a key role by creating low-anxiety, learner-centered classrooms with space for choice and independent learning.
- ❑ The presented lesson plan integrates these principles through personal reflection, communicative practice, and self-assessment.
- ❑ Empowering learners helps them take ownership of their learning and use English beyond the classroom.





Thank you!

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Some additional thoughts and Ideas

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yGyN7ptHAes7ptC5jCwpY_UoOn_dYzQraH65GNMTF8Hs/edit?usp=sharing

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