

Learner Autonomy in the Learner-Centered Curriculum

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Most teachers believe that the idea of a Learner-Centered Curriculum, where the students are responsible for deciding the direction their learning experiences will take them and how they will achieve their final goal, to be a relatively new concept in education. Others think that allowing the students to take control of their own learning process can only be attempted when working with adults who have their specific objectives in mind. As you will read in the following section these assumptions are misconceptions. The purpose of the following discussion is **not** to convince teachers that their teaching approaches and techniques are obsolete, but to offer supplementary classroom techniques to promote learner autonomy, the basis of which has been in existence for nearly eighty years.

History

Elements of the Learner-Centered Curriculum began to appear at the turn of the century when progressive educational curriculum developers such as John Dewey began to explore many of what are now important features of Learner-Centered Curriculum. The concept of a school where the students "discovered" knowledge through self-directed investigation and the teacher was a guide through the process was a social reaction to the typical *Herbartians'* style of education where the curriculum was designed to teach a "known" body of knowledge. These progressive educators thought that the content of a course was interesting to the student only when it served the purpose of the learner. The students participated in formulating their own goals for learning instead of the adult or "expert" selecting the content based on his view of what would be important to the learner in the future. The guiding philosophy was that schools should offer learning opportunities for children and young learners to explore topics that were related to their present experiences and to provide the students with the skills to self-evaluate their own learning and behavior in terms of cooperation and participation with other members of the group (Posner 1992: 50-55).

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These learning and teaching theories were embodied in Dewey's curriculum philosophy which has become known as *Experiential* or *Social Reconstructionist*. This educational philosophy evolved at the end of the 19th century and in the early years of this century during the Industrial Revolution when many people, especially recent immigrants, were living and working under difficult conditions. The experiential (or learner-centered) view of education was part of a response to a host of ills brought on by major social changes caused by the secondary effects of the Industrial Revolution. During this period, formal education for the poor was limited to a minority and training in the practical skills needed by the masses to get along in American society went on primarily through apprenticeships and the activities of daily living. As the United States and other nations became increasingly urbanized and industrialized, compulsory school attendance laws were passed causing the curriculum of public schools to become more oriented toward practical subjects and social utility. Before this change in curriculum, the educational system had offered classes which emphasized classical literature, history, philosophy and other classes which had little to do with the immigrants' reality.

Dewey believed that traditional educational philosophies were inadequate largely because they viewed the goals of education as external to the learner. Dewey viewed the purpose as internal, found within the experiences of the individual, such as thoughts and feelings. He felt that "true" education was that which had positive reactions for the further development of the learner. With this, Dewey had added a new curriculum criterion of educational development for the healthy growth of individual experience. Any subject or course that was chosen for, or recommended to students, should contribute to their intellectual, social and personal development. During the 1920s and 1930s the traditional academic curriculum that American schools had inherited as a legacy of the nineteenth century gradually incorporated different experiential emphases; however, few experiments in genuinely experiential education were initiated and most of these were on a small scale and of short duration.

The most well documented experiential school was Dewey's own laboratory school at the University of Chicago. He wanted life in the school to offer opportunities for children to act morally and to learn how to judge their own behavior in terms of the social ideals of participation and positive service. The materials for learning were consistent with the experiences the learner already had but would also introduce new objects and events to stimulate new ways to observe and judge. He did not believe that the goal of a curriculum should be merely the acquisition of subject matter, but instead it should be a tool for understanding and intelligently ordering experience. It should be a vehicle for providing the skills and knowledge necessary to help the learner become autonomous in his process of learning.

Dewey's goals were (1) to offer children of all ages opportunities to recognize social problems that affected society, (2) to teach the learner how to formulate attainable goals for themselves and other members of their group, (3) to seek solutions to these problems through their self-directed learning experiences, and (4) to evaluate the attainment of the goals. The over-riding philosophy behind all of the courses that the learner took was that he was the center of the curriculum and an active participant in the decision of purposes and goals for the class. The learner was responsible for the selection and organization of the learning experiences to meet their goals and in the evaluation of the curriculum and of his own learning (McNeil 1985: 332-333).

From the early 1970s though the 1980s the learner-centered classroom has under-gone a rebirth due to the influence of humanistic and cognitivist psychologists. This revival has effected all content classrooms at all levels and for all ages. The Second and Foreign Language classroom has felt the change as much as Physics and World History.

Autonomy and EFL

Learner autonomy and learner self-direction are two terms that are often applied in relation to both the Learner-Centered Curriculum and language learning strategies. In the past, autonomy and self-direction have been used to reflect minor differences in meaning, but for the purposes of this paper, they will have an identical meaning: the learner's attitude of responsibility for his own learning and how it can be best achieved.

Language teaching methodologists have in the last decades looked at how the tasks set for students and materials that they are asked to use can be improved or changed. The importance of self-concept and affective factors have become significant considerations in learning and teaching theories. Research into the learners' cognitive or mental processes has shown that students are not the "passive" learners that they were once thought to be. They are actively involved in selectively processing incoming data, contrasting, elaborating, hypothesizing, reconstructing meaning and integrating it with previously stored information for future use. New insights from the area of sociolinguistics have emphasized the pragmatic function of language as a determining factor in the selection of content to be processed (Wenden 1991:1). These disclosures have further encouraged the development of the learner-centered classroom.

Teaching practices which reflect the learner-centered philosophy can now be found in many "eclectic" EFL/ESL classrooms. The new learner-centered techniques are intent on making the students more responsible for their own learning making them better learners instead of passive "victims". Even though these techniques give the learner a more central role in the classroom, they are

also focusing on the teachers and obliging them to change *what* and *how* they teach. They encourage teachers to help students learn how to learn and many times give suggestions for providing *learner* training.

Recent research and theory in second language learning strongly implies that the success of learners is principally due to their use of strategies to assist in gaining command of the language skills. Recently many studies have been published indicating that overtly teaching learning strategies to less competent learners, considerably enhances the development of the second language skills. Acquisition of language learning strategies also encourages greater overall self-direction or autonomy which is essential to the outside-of-class active development of the second language ability.

Owing to our culture and educational system, most Mexican language students are passive and accustomed to being spoon-fed the content of their classes. They like to be told what they must do to learn and then will only do what is necessary to get a passing grade. Attitudes and behaviors like this make it difficult to help students. Teaching learning strategies will have minimal success unless the learners want to have greater responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy is a gradual process, increasing as the learners become more accustomed to the idea of being responsible.

Foreign language teachers also have problems adjusting to the idea of learner autonomy. We expect to be seen as authority figures in the classroom not as helpers, guides, consultants or advisers. In our new capacity as a learner-centered strategy facilitator, we can help students to identify their existing learning strategies, conduct training to acquire new ones and, thus, help the learners become more independent. This change can also make us more creative teachers. Our new status will no longer be based on hierarchical authority, but on the quality and importance of the relationship between student and teacher.

Strategies defined

During the past fifteen years one intensive area of investigation by educational and linguistic researchers has been student learning strategies. Researchers have found that "strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence" (Oxford 1990: 1).

In the area of modern curriculum development, interest has been shifting from emphasizing *what* students learn, which is the product or end result of the language class, to *how* the second language is being learned, which is emphasizing the cognitive process of learning. This is evident in the various learner-cen-

tered approaches such as counseling-learning, community-learning, Co-operative-learning, etc. In these the student is guided through the process of learning or *concept formation*. Concept formation was an important education principle for Dewey's laboratory school, but in recent years the term has begun to be known as *insight, inference, and problem-solving*. The common element is that they all demonstrate the principles of how thinking skills are developed.

A variety of process factors such as second language level, teachers, task requirements, sex, age, nationality, field of study, learning styles have been identified to affect the choice of strategies. Obviously, those students who have had more language learning experience will employ strategies which are more sophisticated and those who have had teachers who emphasized tasks which called for certain types of strategies over others will tend to use those. Age affects style and strategy choice as does sex. Young children generally resort to memory strategies while it has been found that females have a wider range of strategies to choose from than do males (Oxford: 13). Also the country of origin influences the strategy used. For example, Spanish speakers prefer kinesthetic and tactile as major learning styles, do not like group work learning situations but use more social strategies than other language groups. In major fields, visual learning is preferred by students in hard sciences while humanities majors are the least oriented in that direction. (Reid 1987: 94-98) Cognitive styles of learning such as field dependent or field independent are also seen as affecting patterns of learning and thinking. Other related cognitive styles like *extroverts* or *introverts* and *judging* or *perceiving* have a strong effect on the strategies that the EFL learners use (Johnson 1994:18-19).

According to Wenden (1991: 18) there are two main kinds of learning strategies, *cognitive* and *self-management* strategies. The learner uses cognitive strategies in order to process input of linguistic and socio-linguistic nature. Self-management (also referred to a metacognitive or regulatory) strategies are used by learners to check or manage their own learning. It is this strategy which is most generally connected with self-directed learning.

Briefly, *Cognitive* strategies can be sub-divided into four principle types: *selection, understanding, storage* and *retrieval*. Since humans are constantly being bombarded with input through all of our senses, we must select only what we wish to process. Usually it is unconsciously programmed in advance what information we will pay attention to. After the information has been selected, it is transferred to where it is changed into a meaningful representation (understanding) before being stored in long-term memory. Information which has been selected and stored must be able to be retrieved automatically when needed.

Self-Management Strategies are used by students to regulate their own learning. In the literature of cognitive psychology they are referred to as the metacognitive strategies and are those which are most related to autonomous learning. These strategies are sub-divided into planning which is when learners decide their objectives for the language task and the means by which they will reach it. Monitoring consists of the self-assessment which is done during the learning or communication process, and evaluating occurs when the learner evaluates the result of the learning process or use of a particular strategy. (Wenden: 20-28).

Oxford (1990:14) presents a different system of language learning strategies which are divided into two distinct classes: *direct* and *indirect*. The *direct* is composed of memory, cognitive and compensation while the *indirect* consists of metacognitive, social and affective.

Of the *direct* class, memory is used for "remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, and compensation strategies for using the language despite knowledge gaps". In the second group of strategies, *indirect*, the metacognitive strategies are used for "coordinating the learning process, affective strategies for regulating emotions, and social strategies for learning with others".

The table in the Appendix shows Oxford's (1990:18-21) strategy system with the sub-strategies and examples.

Application

There have been many cases worldwide of schools which have applied experiential language learning and where learners of all ages have become motivated to use a wide range of learning strategies, thus, becoming more autonomous learners. At the beginning of this paper, it was stated that the learner-centered approach could be used with all ages of students. However, most teachers find it difficult to believe that elementary school students in a second language class can be taught with this system. Oxford (1990:221) documents a program in Denmark which has found strategy learning to be very useful in its elementary EFL program. All of the primary grade levels have used the learner-centered program in English classes containing a range of 20-30 students per group. The children come from lower-middle class economic families where few are expected to continue their studies beyond high school. In this program the learners decide their own needs and interests, make their own syllabuses, form contracts with the teacher and regularly self-evaluate their progress. At the beginning of the course, the students are asked why they want to learn English and what they would like to do with the language. This enables the learners to decide their own needs for the language. The first materials are brought in by the students and reflect what they

wish to achieve. The children learn grammar inductively by making wall-posters about those points. A large range of possible learning strategies are introduced to the children and they are encouraged to use as many as possible while working with their materials and activities, thus, making decisions for themselves about the direction their learning will take.

Wenden (1991: 137) mentions another experiential primary school in Finland where the learners are introduced to self-directed learning in their English class in order to cope with heterogeneous groupings. The topics are chosen because of their relevancy to the learner and for practice of the language skills. Initially, the themes are directly connected to the students' immediate situation and then gradually expanded first to the Finnish society and then to the international community. However, it is the learners who design the class activities to meet their objectives. Teachers are given training in autonomous and experiential learning while they are completing their graduate level courses in education.

Besides primary, there have been many recorded accounts of secondary, university and adult language classes explicitly or implicitly teaching language strategies in order to facilitate the process of autonomy in language learning. Allowing students to have a voice in the direction they want their learning to take, should not be seen as a passing fad. Active learning techniques and a degree of participant choice have always been a basis of all good EFL training for teachers and learners alike.

Alternative classroom activities to promote autonomy

Introducing an awareness in our learners of their own learning style preferences that they bring with them to the language classroom is the first step in achieving learning autonomy. This involves identifying the learning styles and strategies that your students already have. For most of our students, the idea of a learning style preference is new. As a communicative class activity, begin with general questions that they can answer as a group activity about their classroom learning experiences. For example:

- Do you understand better when you hear instructions or when you read them?
- Do you remember better when you study alone or with friends?
- Do you learn better in class when the teacher lectures or when you do an experiment?
- Do you prefer to work by yourself on a project or in a group?
- Do you learn best in class when you can participate physically in a learning activity or by taking notes.

Or, the following questionnaire can be easily written on the blackboard or dictated as a class activity. Make sure the students use the scale provided to facilitate their answers.

| | | | | |
|--------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> | <i>5</i> |
| <i>never</i> | <i>rarely</i> | <i>sometimes</i> | <i>often</i> | <i>very frequently</i> |

1. I learn best step-by-step.
2. I learn best by acting a situation out in dialogue form.
3. I learn best by seeing something first.
4. I learn best by listening to something first.
5. I learn best by using a combination of senses.
6. I learn best by using a variety of techniques depending on the situation.
7. I learn best in one-to-one situations.
8. I learn best when doing small group work because I like to have someone to work with.
9. I learn best when working alone at my own rate.
10. I learn best as part of a large classroom group.
11. I think how I feel determines how I learn best.
12. I generally participate actively in small-group discussion.
13. I generally participate actively in large-group discussion.

(Wenden 1991: 146)

After the students have considered their answers try some of the following activities: have students tell you the purpose of the questions, discuss their answers and allow this to lead into an open forum concerning how each student learns best, put them into groups for further investigation in the library, have them discuss and decide the different styles that their teachers use and design questionnaires to be given to other students at the school. The purpose of these activities is to help students to increase their awareness of learning differences and identify and assess the effectiveness of their own individual styles in the hope that later they will be able to modify their particular style(s) to better adjust to different learning situations.

Another alternative is to use a scale to measure language learning strategies which are published and easily available such as the SILL (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*) of which representative items are shown below.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Generally not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Generally true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

When learning a new word.....

1. I create associations between new material and what I already know
2. I put the new word in a sentence so I can remember it.
3. I associate the sound of the new word with the sound of a familiar word.
4. I use rhyming to remember it
5. I remember the word by making a clear mental image of it or by drawing a picture.

When learning the new language.....

6. I say or write new expressions repeatedly to practice them
7. I look for words in Spanish that are similar to new words in the new language.
8. I find the meaning of a word by dividing it into parts which I understand.
9. I look for similarities and contrasts between the new language and my own.
10. I look for patterns in the new language.

Or you can devise your own observation form by making a list of the strategies you think are the most important for the purposes of the program you are using.

Once you know how your students are presently learning, you can help them to learn more efficiently by exposing them to various activities in which they will find it necessary to use strategy(s). Teachers must learn how to facilitate the learning process of students and students must learn how to learn. Strategy training is especially important in the area of second languages because student self-direction is necessary if the learner is to reach an acceptable level of communicative ability.

Oxford (1990: 202-203) identifies three types of strategy training: awareness training, one-time training and long-term training. During awareness training the learners are introduced to and becomes familiar with the general idea of learning strategies. They are not required to use strategies in any language tasks but it only raises their conscious understanding. One-time strategy training is the learning and practicing of strategies which the learners needs to meet their particular objectives. This is short and can usually be accomplished within several sessions. Long-term training is more prolonged, includes a larger number of strategies and seems to be the most effective training technique. This type of training involves a longer period of time since the learner must learn not only when and how to use the strategies, but, also how to monitor and evaluate the performance of them. The learner is completely informed of the reasons why the strategies will help, and has an adequate amount of practice and time for self-evaluation.

As the teacher directs the strategy training, he/she should be sure to point out the reasons why strategy training is important, provide ample practice in more than one language task and teach the learners how to evaluate the success of their new strategy. Learning strategy training must include not only the strategies but it must also begin with a discussion of role changes that the teacher should

explore with the learners about their feelings of accepting more responsibility in the learning process. If students cannot change some of their beliefs about education, there will be little benefit from the process. Also, if cultural influences are the reasons why the learners are opposed learning new strategies, the new strategies will have to be introduced gradually and possibly mixed with those strategies the learner already is familiar with. In other words ...camouflaged.

Each teacher must make decisions about the strategy training of learners based on their own situation and students. If learner autonomy and strategies are new to you, then some of the ideas presented in this paper can be adapted to your situation. Or, perhaps you are a teacher who is familiar with the research, but will say to yourself, "That's nice, but I don't have time to use them with my groups". Use something of what you have learned here to prepare your students. Language skills and self-directed learning must be approached as a single unit with the learners. Remember, we as teachers must prepare our learners for tomorrow and what better way than to give them strategies they can carry with them into any learning situation. An autonomous learner will have the skills to continue his studies of English not for one class but for the rest of his life.

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Appendix

I. Direct Strategies

A. Memory

1. Creating mental linkages
 - a. Grouping
 - b. Associating/elaborating
 - c. Placing new words into a context
2. Applying images and sounds
 - a. Using imagery
 - b. Semantic mapping
 - c. Using keywords
 - d. Representing sounds in memory
3. Reviewing well
 - a. Structured reviewing
4. Employing action
 - a. Using physical response or sensation
 - b. Using mechanical techniques

B. Cognitive Strategies

1. Practicing
 - a. Repeating
 - b. Formally practicing with sounds and writing systems
 - c. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
 - d. Recombining
 - e. Practicing naturalistically
2. Receiving and sending messages
 - a. Getting the idea quickly
 - b. Using resources for receiving and sending messages
3. Analyzing and reasoning
 - a. Reasoning deductively
 - b. Analyzing expressions
 - c. Analyzing contrastively (across languages)
 - d. Translating
 - e. Transferring
4. Creating structure for input and output
 - a. Taking notes
 - b. Summarizing
 - c. Highlighting

C. Compensation Strategies

1. Guessing Intelligently
 - a. Using linguistic clues
 - b. Using other clues
2. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing
 - a. Switching to the mother tongue
 - b. Getting help
 - c. Using mime or gesture
 - d. Avoiding communication partially or totally
 - e. Selecting the topic
 - f. Adjusting or approximating the message

- g. Coining words
- h. Using a circumlocution or synonym

II. Indirect Strategies

A. Metacognitive Strategies

1. Centering learning
 - a. Overviewing and linking with already known material
 - b. Paying attention
 - c. Delaying speech production to focus on listening
2. Arranging and planning learning
 - a. Finding out about language learning
 - b. Organizing
 - c. Setting goals
 - d. Identifying the purpose of a language task
 - e. Planning for a language task
 - f. Seeking practice opportunities
3. Evaluating learning
 - a. Self-monitoring
 - b. Self-evaluating

B. Affective Strategies

1. Lowering anxiety
 - a. Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation
 - b. Using music
 - c. Using laughter
2. Encouraging yourself
 - a. Making positive statements
 - b. Taking risks wisely
 - c. Rewarding yourself
3. Taking emotional temperature
 - a. Listening to your body
 - b. Using a checklist
 - c. Writing a language learning diary
 - d. Discussing feelings with someone else

C. Social Strategies

1. Asking questions
 - a. Asking for clarification or verification
 - b. Asking for correction
2. Cooperating with others
 - a. Cooperating with peers
 - b. Cooperating with proficient users of the new language
3. Empathizing with others
 - a. Developing cultural understanding
 - b. Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings