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From autonomy to agency ... into action.

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As we know, English language teachers need to be proactive and creative. We must help our students overcome all kinds of obstacles on their paths to achievement. But we can't do it alone. Our students should be encouraged to develop their sense of agency, to take responsibility for their own thoughts, actions and success.

A. Introduction

In recent years, we ELT professionals have embraced a range of concepts that shape the way we approach our jobs as teachers. Our role in the classroom has shifted away from being at the centre of the teaching-learning process, transmitting our knowledge of how English functions as a language system, to a much more diverse set of roles focussing on helping our students construct their own knowledge of how English functions as a social instrument. The foundation of this shift has been a desire to motivate our students and to put them at the centre of a dynamic learning process.

We have also shifted our teaching focus away from the traditional emphasis on the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and embraced notions within the construct known as '21st century skills' (see Hurst et al, 2018). We seek to provide learning materials and activities which focus on communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, the so-called 'Four Cs'.

These changes have reframed our approach to providing our students with opportunities: this, in fact, could be a present day definition of what teaching means. The essential conditions so learning can take place are that the teacher should make sure that enough INPUT is available, that there are sufficient opportunities for student INTERACTION and that the students' INVOLVEMENT is guaranteed throughout the process. The linguistic aspect, the social aspect and the psycho-emotional aspect all have to be taken into account when planning our English lessons.

B. Autonomy in ELT

'Learner autonomy' has been on the ELT agenda for several years and was brought into focus perhaps most clearly by Phil Benson, a University professor working in Sydney (Australia), in his influential 2007 article (see references). His ideas have helped to establish a series of five principles for helping our students to become autonomous:

1. foster active student involvement in learning
2. provide options and varied resources
3. offer choices and decision-making opportunities
4. support learners [see also: Smith (2003) on 'supportive engagement']
5. encourage learner reflection

These principles mean that students are discouraged from relying on their teacher as their main source of knowledge; they are encouraged to develop their own capacity to learn for themselves, to make decisions about what they learn, to increase their awareness of their own ways of learning and to cultivate their own learning strategies. So, the teacher becomes less of an instructor and more of a facilitator, providing opportunities for students' active involvement in their own learning.

It is also important to stress that no student is an island; Lev Vygotsky taught us that all learning is situated in a specific social and cultural setting and this 'learning context' is more powerful than any individual. It is the context that gives rise to 'interdependent learning' and the existence of 'communities of practice' (see: Lave & Wenger, 1991 & 1998). This being so we can arrive at a definition of learner autonomy:

"a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person." (Dam et al., 1990, p.102)

C. Learner agency in ELT today

Learner agency can be achieved when the students have a sense of control and ownership, when they are active authors of their own learning: agentive learners believe they can learn and they want to learn. Diane Larsen-Freeman, the famous American Applied Linguist and author of numerous articles and books, sees the central challenge for English language educators is to create practices that help students maximise their potential and give them the tools so that they can adapt and learn beyond their school years (Larsen-Freeman et al, 2021).

Learner agency required a multi-faceted response to our local heterogeneous ELT classrooms; our students occupy a shared learning space but they 'live' that space in multiple ways, each student may require different guidance from their teacher towards becoming more agentive:

“Learner agency can be compared to chess. While a chessboard provides a novice chess player exactly the same physical opportunities as it does a grandmaster, a novice will not initially perceive many of the possible game moves. However, over time, the novice’s awareness of possible moves will gradually improve.” (Driver, 2021, p.16)

Our students have to “actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (Lantlolf & Pavlenko, 2002, p.145), it’s about willingness and action (behaviour) and having the belief that their own decisions/actions can make a difference to their own learning in their own setting (Mercer, 2011). Consequently, as was mentioned with reference to teachers in the ‘Abstract’ of this short article, our students also have to be proactive and creative concerning the personal, cognitive, affective and environmental factors that interact in determining their success at language learning.

D. Concluding remarks

There can be no doubt that there are many constraints on how teachers carry out their classroom duties, from the physical resources available to the social and cultural norms of their educational contexts (see: Priestly et al, 2015). But, encouraging our students to become more agentive does not mean we give up all our responsibilities in the teaching-learning process.

A teacher’s actions in the classroom are always crucial. We still need to engage our students cognitively and emotionally, to manage classroom interactions and to maintain the focus on relevant aspects of the language (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). This along with other ELT issues related to materials development and assessment procedures, for example.

In order to be successful, our students need to be ‘free’ (emancipated? empowered?) “to create their own patterns with meanings and uses and to expand the meaning potential of a given language, not just to internalize a ready-made system.” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p.301).

We need to construct a communicative, collaborative and culturally responsive classroom environment, where we can facilitate transformative learning by letting our learners share their unique perspectives and insights about the world they face, while learning English (Sanczyk, 2020).

Take a few moments to look through the accompanying information sheet called “25 suggestions for developing learner agency” and see how you can implement some of them in your classroom tomorrow!

E. Some references to check out

- i) Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021) The Oxford guide to learner agency: maximising learner potential. Available at: <https://elt.oup.com/feature/global/expert/learner-agency> (accessed on 29th April 2022)
— *You need to register and provide an email address.*
- ii) Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40, pp. 21-40.
- iii) Mercer, S. (2011). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System*, 39, pp. 427-436.
- iv) Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter? (pp. 134-148). Routledge.

Twenty-five suggestions for developing learner agency

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A. Learners as leaders

1. Invite learners to set personal, meaningful learning objectives (identify strengths, weaknesses, ways to improve, possible obstacles, etc.). Revise and support periodically.
2. Learners share their favourite songs/paintings/books: personally relevant content for the class to know about.
3. Learners find a relevant text/blog/picture using their phones/the Internet that connects to the unit theme and say why.
4. Learners record themselves telling their favourite story. The class can listen and reflect on content/language.
5. Learners share stories/accounts of having witnessed a problem arising between people because of a lack/misuse of language. Discuss the origins/consequences of such incidents.
6. Learners keep an online 'learning diary' (as part of a 'portfolio'?) where they comment on their English learning experience. Teacher can periodically give feedback.
7. Learners choose a topical issue from the international 'current affairs' agenda that can be the subject of small-scale debate, regularly.
8. Learners work on 'adapting' a text which is somehow controversial so that it conforms to their opinion/position. Compare their 'new' texts with their classmates'. Discuss differences.
9. Learners create comprehension questions on a text for other groups to read and then answer (and vice versa).
10. Learners work in pairs/groups to write definitions of lexical items that are from a text, for other groups to find the items.

11. Learners provide a 'language puzzle' for the class to work on. Peculiar pieces of language in use that they have discovered through reading/movies/gaming that deserve to be explained.
12. 'English in the street'. Learners bring examples of English from their local physical environment and explain why they like it (or not), why it's in English, etc.
13. Learners self-assess on regular basis (can do statements?) to create a notion of incremental progress. Combine with a focus on 'formative assessment'.
14. Learners do a 'one-minute essay' as a response to a question from the teacher about that day's class/learning activities (to finish the class?).
15. Learners conduct a lesson opening activity: a 'two-minute talk' on "What's important to me". Learners take it in turns to 'open' the lesson.

B. Techniques and tasks

16. Have a quiz/activity before the start of new unit to find out what the learners already know (content/language); use the results as a guide for the selection/adaption/rejection of book-based activities/materials.
17. Provide a 'learning menu' or 'choice board' of different topics that the learners can choose to work on; which issue to be the subject of a debate, which grammar topic to revise before a test, a series of tasks for them to do: in any sequence they want, ... (could be digital?)
18. Provide more problem solving tasks which have multiple solutions; perhaps related to the unit's 'cultural content'. Encourage acceptance of more than one 'truth'.
19. Negotiate and establish 'rules' of behaviour which foster cooperation and collective learning. Make frequent use of jigsaw listening/reading tasks to make the value of cooperation more obvious.

20. Use 'chain' activities where learners combine to produce a text or different answers to a series of questions. Then learners take ownership of a final product/version.
21. Use role plays and dramatised episodes (moments from coursebook texts?) to provide an opportunity for learners to be creative, experiment with language and even adopt a new persona.
22. Encourage 'self-correction' and make frequent use of 'peer correction' and 'peer feedback' after an attempt at self-correction. Reduce 'instant' teacher corrections.
23. Provide choice of type/mode/focus of corrections to be provided by the teacher on a piece of their written work.
24. Look for opportunities to 'gamify' any activity/task using ICT (or not) to enhance the pleasure of learning.
25. Involve the learners in a real life project; plan a school event/trip; something which involves teamwork and research.

C. Essential reading

- Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40, 21-40.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., Driver, P., Gao, X., & Mercer, S. (2021). Learner Agency: Maximizing Learner Potential [PDF]. www.oup.com/elt/expert (accessed on 29th April 2022)
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- Sanczyk, A. (2020). Teacher identity and agency in language teaching: Adult ESL instructors as explorers. *Crossroads Journal of English Studies*, 30, 77-97.

