Who's in charge?

Beth Davies

encourages her learners to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Which of the following quotes from practising English teachers can you identify with in your current teaching context?

- I feel that I'm doing most things right in the classroom, but my students just don't seem to be making much progress.

- Some students don't contribute during groupwork.

- A particular student doesn't do her homework because she 'doesn't have enough time'.

- One of my students says he wants more speaking practice, but I know he only talks to people from his own country outside class.

- I ask my students to correct their own homework with the help of a correction code, but only one or two of them are actually doing this.

- None of my students is using the self-access centre.

- A lot of my students don't seem to have been taught how to think for themselves. They want me to provide them with everything!

- I don't think my students know why they are learning English. They're all adults, so I suppose they have made a choice to study, but I'm not sure whether they know why they've made that choice.

- Some groups seem to want homework, while others resist it.

- My students all have very different learning styles.

- A student refuses to read because he 'doesn't like it'.

- Some of my students have their lesson notes stuffed untidily in their bags.

If you can relate to more than half of the above, it may be time to think about encouraging your learners to become more autonomous by taking more responsibility for their own learning. Explicitly introducing them to learning strategies may be one way in which to do this.

Defining learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is something of a buzz word in ELT (and, indeed, other fields) nowadays, yet the term remains rather ambiguous, meaning different things to different people. Henry Holec's simple definition of learner autonomy as *'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'* seems like a good place to start. More specifically, I would argue that fostering learner autonomy involves helping the learners to understand the *process* of learning, both inside and outside the classroom, which, in turn, enables them to acknowledge the large role they play in their own learning.

Making learners more aware of the learning process

Craig Thaine suggests a number of ways in which we, as teachers, can help to

Inside the classroom	Outside the classroom
● Make the learners aware of the methodology you use and provide them with rationales for your approach. For example, let them know that you set a time limit for some reading tasks so they can practise the sub-skills of skimming and scanning.	● Give the learners an orientation to self-access resources, such as a school library or learning centre.
● Use inductive approaches (eg guided discovery) so that they get used to working things out for themselves.	● Familiarise them with the reference sections in their coursebooks.
	● Offer them options when setting homework.
● Develop autonomy by having the learners read instructions silently to themselves, rather than always giving instructions verbally.	● Let them know about opportunities for exposure to authentic English in the town where they live.
	● Encourage them to revise language covered in class regularly.
● Encourage regular peer checking before whole-group feedback to enable them to learn from each other.	● Point out specific resources (books, websites, apps) that they can use.
	● Suggest they implement some kind of learning system that works for them in order to record what they have learnt.
● Set aside some class time for self-study so that they get used to working independently.	● Help them to formulate short- and long-term learning goals and outline some key action points for achieving these.

raise our learners' awareness of the learning process, both in and out of the classroom. There are some practical ideas in the table above.

Identifying goals

As the final point in column 2 of the table suggests, in order to take responsibility for their own learning, students need to identify what their needs are and to set goals for themselves. For example, do they want to achieve 6.5 in the IELTS exam? Improve their pronunciation? Increase their reading speed? Once your learners have identified (or been helped to identify) their *reasons* for learning, the next step is to identify the learning *strategies* and *resources* that will help them to achieve their goals.

Defining learning strategies

Learning strategies can be defined as goal-directed behaviours which help learners to become more autonomous. Basically, they are procedures that learners use to make language learning easier and, unlike learning *styles*, which are usually considered relatively stable characteristics, such techniques can be consciously learnt or changed. As language teachers, I believe it is our responsibility to raise our learners' awareness of learning strategies and encourage their use.

To make this clearer, let's look at some different types of learning strategies, along with some examples. According to Rebecca Oxford, strategies can be divided into the following categories:

1 **Memory strategies** help learners to store and retrieve information. These may include labelling objects around the house with sticky notes or rewriting notes made in class.

2 **Cognitive strategies** focus on the mental processes involved in learning, which enable learners to understand and produce new language. Examples include reading signs in public places and trying to work out what they mean, or making notes before carrying out a writing or speaking task.

3 **Compensation strategies** allow learners to communicate, despite deficiencies in their language knowledge. While speaking, this may involve paraphrasing or employing circumlocution to get around unknown vocabulary; when reading, it may involve ignoring unknown words or deducing meaning from context.

4 **Metacognitive strategies** go above and beyond the cognitive level, and allow learners to control their own learning through organising, planning and evaluating. They may involve setting goals and time aside for learning and/or self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses.

5 **Affective strategies** help learners gain control over their emotions, attitudes, motivations and values. For instance, relaxing by listening to songs or watching TV in the target language and getting to know classmates.

6 **Social strategies** help learners interact with other people. For example, socialising with native speakers or cooperating with classmates during groupwork.

While such theoretical distinctions can be useful, it is important to remember that the boundaries may be 'fuzzy' and learners may employ more than one strategy at a time. Indeed, it could be argued that the most effective learners are those who are able to combine strategies as needed.

Factors affecting strategy use

Although learning strategies are generally considered to be useful and valuable to many language learners, strategy use is influenced by a whole host of factors, which need to be taken into account. Given the goal-directedness of strategies, it appears logical that the presence of motivation is likely to lead to greater strategy use. Another important factor is the language learning environment: there are likely to be more opportunities for particular types of strategy use in English-speaking, as opposed to

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▶▶▶ non-English-speaking environments. Other learner characteristics, such as learning style, personality type, gender and age, may also affect how our students respond to particular strategies and their subsequent strategy use.

Whilst these factors are clearly important, and the best ways in which to conduct strategy instruction for *individual* learners need to be considered, research (and my own personal experience) has shown greater strategy use to result in higher levels of language proficiency amongst learners *in general*. Therefore, I believe, improving strategy use is an important first step in producing more able and effective language users. Learning strategies are teachable and, below, I will look at practical ways in which we can effectively introduce them in our classrooms.

Implications for classroom practice

Here are some suggestions for optimising strategy instruction in the classroom:

1 Address affective and learning style issues.

Get to know your learners as individuals and identify their preferred learning style(s). Notice whether they respond best to visual, auditory or kinaesthetic activities, for example, or ask them to complete a learning style questionnaire. This will help you to initiate appropriate strategy instruction relevant to their needs.

2 Focus on strategies your students really need.

Which strategies are most important in helping your learners to achieve their goals? Start small and begin with these, rather than attempting to launch straight into full-blown strategy-based language instruction.

3 Integrate strategy instruction into your language classes on a regular basis.

Try to include some strategy instruction in every lesson. If strategy work is systematically woven into your regular classes, it is likely to be more beneficial than if it is thrown in on an *ad hoc* basis.

4 Be explicit.

Tell your learners what you're doing and why! Although it may be obvious to you, it may not be to them. Why is strategy work important? How will it benefit them? Be clear and explicit.

5 Reflect.

Evaluating learning strategies can lead to greater understanding of them by both teachers and learners. Ask your learners to assess the usefulness of learning strategy instruction and use by means of practical techniques, such as questionnaires, interviews and observation.

You may also find it useful to evaluate the impact of your strategy instruction on your learners' progress: how often (and appropriately) are learning strategies employed, and what effect is this having on their language proficiency? However, remember, that progress is likely to occur over an extended period of time, rather than rapidly.

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Integrating work on learning strategies into our classrooms shifts the focus from teachers and teaching and, instead, places it firmly on learners and learning. By providing our learners with the necessary tools to take responsibility for their own learning, it may be possible to facilitate greater autonomy and, ultimately, increased language proficiency. *ETp*

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