Eight steps to learner autonomy

Tom Sarney learns how to transform an unpromising class into a positive one.

Two things prompted me to write this article.

Firstly, *an admission*. For a considerable time, I was a long-term, *bona fide*, self-professed 'learner autonomy sceptic'. Although I found the vast amounts of learner autonomy theory out there quite exciting, intriguing and appealing, my numerous attempts to create more independent learners often fell short of my expectations. Having experimented with learner diaries, SMART learning 'plans', peer-correction initiatives and a plethora of guided metacognitive reflection tasks, I was, more often than not, left feeling that, despite my noble intentions and considerable effort, I had failed to create more effective, focused and motivated learning.

The second impetus was *an epiphany*, a realisation that emerged from a 'critical incident', a 'magic classroom moment' that forced me to reconsider my initial doubts about fostering learner independence. It was a realisation that convinced me that learner autonomy was not some kind of unreachable educational ideal, but a grass-roots classroom reality which can emerge if we, as teachers, put the right wheels in motion.

A negative situation

I was working in a large private language school in Latin America. My students consisted mainly of young professionals, the majority of whom needed English for professional success. Typically, for institutions of this nature, course completion was determined by progression through coursebook units and a summative end-of-term test.

I had just inherited an existing upper-intermediate class and, adhering to custom, I approached their previous teacher to get as much information as I could about the class before the course began. The conversation followed a pattern which may be familiar to some readers ...

Me: *I've got your upper-intermediate class this term.*
Colleague: *Oh dear, I was wondering who was going to get lumbered with them.*
Me: *Why, what's wrong with them?*
Colleague: *Hard work … a total grind … You'll see what I mean!*

After the first lesson, I realised my colleague was right. They *were* hard work. Many of the students arrived late and made excuses to leave early. During the lesson, some students constantly gazed at the clock and flicked distractedly at forthcoming pages in the coursebook. Communicative tasks were completed mechanically, with very little sense of enjoyment, enthusiasm or spontaneity. There was a distinct lack of humour or camaraderie amongst the students, and many members of the class did not contribute at all to group discussions or feedback stages. Tried and tested activities fell flat.

'Flow' is described by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi as *'being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved'*. However, the palpable sense of grim determination simply to 'get through' the materials had almost created a state of 'anti-flow', a far cry from the vision of the student described by literature on learner independence, autonomy and motivation which I had read so much about.

A positive approach

Avoiding the descent into a vicious circle of frustration, and in the spirit of the 'reflective practitioner', I decided to adopt a positive-action-oriented approach. Armed with a desk full of books by David Little, Leni Dam, Phil Benson, Jill Hadfield, Brian Morrison and Diego Navarro, and Ágota Scharle and Anita Szabó, I attempted to put theory to the test and to transform my learning environment and create more independent and motivated learners.

Here are the steps I took, preceded by the quotes that inspired them, and what happened as a result ...

Step 1 – Listen to your learners.

'The essence of learner autonomy is willing, proactive and reflective involvement in one's own learning.' (Little)

The first step I took was to find out about my individual learners and the learning experiences which had brought them to this point. I designed a simple sentence-completion reflection task, as shown in the box below.

Please complete these sentences (as honestly as possible):

I learn best when ...

I really like lessons that ...

The time when I felt most motivated/engaged was ...

On a scale of 1–10, my motivation is about a ... because ...

One thing that really frustrates me about studying English is ...

After the students had completed the task individually, I conducted short one-to-one interviews to follow up on their responses. A familiar pattern emerged. Most of them felt obliged to study English in order to improve their future job prospects. Initially, they had felt enthusiasm and excitement towards studying a language which might transform their future, and they had felt motivated by their progress at lower levels. However, these positive attitudes had been replaced by

feelings of frustration at their perceived lack of progress and resentment at paying the expensive course fees. Many found juggling work, family and studying exhausting, and few felt they could dedicate enough time to self-study and really make the most of the course. For some, getting the end-of-course certificate was the sole motivation for attending class, and some spoke of getting to the end of the levels and 'finishing' English.

Step 2 – Build group cohesion.

'A positive group atmosphere can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation and self-image of its members, and thus significantly affect their learning.' (Hadfield)

I summarised the interviews and presented the results to the whole class. It was clear there was a great deal of commonality. We spoke about their frustrations and how we could make their experience more positive. As a result of this discussion, we decided to take a break from the coursebook for several lessons and focus on practice. I selected and designed a series of 'humanistic' speaking activities which encouraged the sharing of personal experiences and memories such as:

- drawing and discussing the students' family trees;
- visualising, drawing and sharing positive personal visions of the future;
- presenting a life line and answering questions about positive/negative life experiences;
- sharing unusual, embarrassing and surprising personal facts.

I encouraged the students to find things they had in common with each classmate, and I regularly changed interaction patterns. I selected quieter members of the class to summarise discussions. I introduced some team vocabulary games and some kinaesthetic activities and used mini-drama activities for warmers.

Step 3 – Negotiate motivating goals.

'Even otherwise motivated learners may assume a passive role if they feel the teacher should be in charge of everything that happens in the classroom.' (Scharle and Szabó)

As morale began to build, we returned to the prescribed course content for the level. We examined the coursebook and the learning outcomes, and we prioritised how we should spend class time, using a simple sentence-completion task:

> The activities/language/texts that seem really engaging/relevant are ...
> If we have time, I wouldn't mind spending class time on ...
> I'd rather not dedicate class time to ..

We revisited the initial sentence completion and identified 'magic learning moments' and established the type of lesson that engaged and motivated the students. Collaboratively, we created a class manifesto in which lessons should be *dynamic*, *unexpected*, *fun*, *exciting*, *unpredictable* and *enjoyable*, and the students should *be active*, *ask questions* and *contribute in all activities*. As we explored the coursebook, we discovered that one of the texts which appealed to all the students was on the worldwide popularity of soap operas. Spontaneously, the class began discussing a current soap and other famous Latin soap operas they had seen. Inspired by an idea I had seen in a number of teaching materials, I suggested it might be fun to create our own soap opera, an idea which was met with an enthusiasm I hadn't seen in the class until then. A project was born …

Step 4 – Establish constraints and parameters.

'We don't simply leave learners to their own devices, but we actively encourage and assist them to take control of their learning.' (Benson)

To start the next lesson, I presented a possible project outline for the creation of the class soap opera. I used a set of binary options, which the students plotted on a cline. Collectively, we established our project parameters:

> *Should our soap be …?*
> *presented publicly* _____ *or privately?*
> *done in class* _____ *or at home?*
> *spoken* _____ *or written?*
> *produced on video* _____ *or audio?*
> *created in groups* _____ *or individually?*
> *one scene* _____ *or a whole episode?*
> *evaluated on language* _____ *or content?*
> *low-tech*_____ *or high-tech?*

After some discussion, we agreed that the soap would be:

- a video production, created in groups chosen at random;
- evaluated on language studied on previous courses as well as dramatic impact and technical skill;
- shown to other students in the school at the end of term;
- written at home with 30–60 minutes of class time each week dedicated to preparation and rehearsal;
- three scenes from a 'pilot' episode;
- created using iPads and basic editing software.

We decided on a time frame for each step so we would be ready to present the work at the end of term to other classes in the school. Together, we brainstormed evaluation criteria for the final product, which included criteria related to language as well as content and originality and also criteria for process, including participation and collaboration. I informed the students that they would not be evaluated using official end-of-course tests.

Step 5 – Encourage collaboration.

Collaboration *'encourages the learners to rely on each other and not only the teacher … this is one of the building blocks of developing learner autonomy'*. (Scharle and Szabó)

I designed a series of collaborative classroom tasks to scaffold and support the students.

Firstly, we brainstormed soap opera conventions and organised them on mind maps according to place, people, actions and nouns. Secondly, I cut out pictures from magazines and downloaded some from the internet for the students to use in constructing their story. We identified the need for roles, and the class decided which members would type the script, who would

proofread it, which of them were proficient with editing software and who would prefer to remain behind the camera. We mined the coursebook for language to include and translated chunks of language which would make the soap more dramatic.

Step 6 – Provide resources and guidance.

'... as well as having an awareness of the range of resources and where to find them, learners can also benefit from an understanding of the multiple ways of using materials.' (Morrison and Navarro)

I created a list of resources which would help the students create their soap. These related to content, language and technical production. Examples of resources included:

- *YouTube* links to soap operas around the world;
- Articles on soap operas;
- Translation apps;
- Tips and formulas for writing dramatic story lines;
- Easy-step guides to using *Movie Maker*;
- Video conferencing tools and *Dropbox* so groups could share and discuss ideas.

I accompanied these links with simple worksheets to help the students make the most of the resources. These included activities to encourage:

- skimming and extracting main information from reading texts;
- note-taking skills using visual organisers;
- mind mapping;
- using electronic dictionaries and translators to find collocations and idioms.

Step 7 – Monitor, support and encourage.

'... as students begin to take charge of their learning, the teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator or counsellor in an increasing number (and type) of classroom situations.' (Scharle and Szabó)

As the project continued, a remarkable change happened. Unlike the passive unmotivated students I had met in the initial lesson, the students began to work much more collaboratively and independently. Rather than arriving late and leaving early, by the time I arrived at the classroom many would have arrived early and would be discussing, preparing and rehearsing the script. As we approached the day of the showing, the students set up *Skype* groups to communicate ideas, negotiate script changes and suggest language they wanted to incorporate. There was a newfound sense of positive energy, humour and camaraderie in the classroom. I began to take much more of a back seat as the students worked together to create their final product, monitoring, advising on language, correcting their grammar and pronunciation and offering encouraging words.

Step 8 – Focus on evaluation and reflection.

'Evaluation plays a pivotal role in the development of learner autonomy.' (Dam)

The final product that the class unveiled to an audience of over 60 students exceeded all our expectations in terms of the quality of the language and the production. The video was clearly a labour of love, and there was a real sense of pride as the other students watched, laughed and applauded. After our guest audience had left, we did a series of evaluation and reflection tasks. Firstly, the students self-evaluated their *product* using the criteria we had established previously. Secondly, I asked the students to reflect on and evaluate the *experience* and what they had learnt. There were a number of comments which stood out:

I wish we could do something like this on every course.
It was like we weren't studying but I learnt a lot.
It gave me opportunity to review the language I had half learnt.
I think a positive attitude is the key to learning.

Lessons learnt

Up until this course, I had become convinced that, in the words of Dam, *'developing learner autonomy is a long difficult process, not least for the teacher'*. However, in hindsight, despite some initial hard work which involved listening, consulting and negotiating with my students, as well as some work locating resources and designing tasks, the process of developing learner autonomy seemed natural, spontaneous and effortless, a little like Csíkszentmihályi's description of 'flow'.

On reflection, perhaps our profession is sometimes guilty of making learner autonomy more difficult than it should be. Courses driven by getting through the units of a coursebook which are designed around mastery and testing of grammar items may actually foster learner *dependence* and not *independence*.

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By listening to our students and involving them in decision-making on the level of tasks, outcomes, materials and evaluation, and creating frameworks and parameters for focused collaborative work, we can create more favourable conditions for the emergence of more independent and motivated learners. Try it and see what happens! ■

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Tom Sarney has over 20 years' experience in ELT. He has worked as a teacher, teacher trainer and academic manager in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Australia and the Middle East. His professional interests include integrating multimedia in the classroom, evidence-based teaching and task-based learning.

Tom.Sarney@nile-elt.com