

Learner choice

Stephanie Hirschman gives her students options both in class and at home.

Many teachers who are working in an EFL context will find that they have some or all of the following issues to contend with at some point during their teaching careers:

- Mixed levels in one class, including 'spiky' profiles, eg one learner who is fluent but inaccurate, while another learner is focused on accuracy and lacks the confidence to speak.
- Mixed ages in one class, ranging from teenagers with short attention spans and their own circadian rhythms to professional adults who approach their studies with the same commitment they bring to full-time work.
- Long sessions, by which I mean long lessons and/or many hours of lessons programmed during one week, with the corresponding fluctuations in energy level for the learners.

My own teaching context, working with international students at a college in the UK, has sometimes required me to deal with all of these scenarios simultaneously, and it's a real challenge to ensure learning is taking place for each individual, while sustaining engagement. My initial reaction – to plan lively activities which involve getting up and moving around the room – is quite helpful; this is, in any case, good practice for any lesson. However, it doesn't help *enough*, particularly during long or late afternoon sessions, and it makes me feel a bit too much like a party planner. Anyway, perhaps the learners really need some time to process input in a more thoughtful and reflective way, through activities which also promote independent studentship.

I was browsing through a new coursebook series for teenagers (*Impact*, published by Cengage), and I noticed that each unit of study concluded with a project, or productive activity, which offered the learners a choice of both topic and task type to practise the language point from the unit. For example, one unit offered the topics of flight or space exploration, and learners could either choose to write one scene from a film or prepare a presentation. Further choice was provided throughout each unit by setting different classroom or independent study tasks for the learners to undertake, working alone or in pairs or groups, but all with the same learning outcome. The publisher's website indicates the benefits of this active participation approach:

- It caters for different learning styles.
- It empowers the students.
- It prepares the students for higher education.
- It gives the students ownership over their learning.

This started me thinking about how I could incorporate meaningful, autonomous and motivational activities into

lessons based on other materials, without spending too much time creating new resources. In this article, I will describe some of these activities, which I have used during lessons, as homework or independent study, and in collaboration with my students' home-stay providers.

Learner autonomy during the lesson

I started to supplement the coursebook my mixed-level group of teenagers were using (*Innovations Advanced*) with additional choices in my planning. In a recent lesson, we were looking at 'verb + noun' collocations which are often used to talk about war. For example:

<i>declare</i>	→	<i>a ceasefire</i>
<i>descend into</i>	→	<i>civil war</i>
<i>pull out</i>	→	<i>all the troops</i>
<i>prop up</i>	→	<i>a regime</i>

We completed the gap-fill dialogue exercises in our coursebook in the usual way, and also discussed the collocations in context and identified examples from the news or from history which related to each expression.

I had made some cut-up cards to help the learners master the combinations. However, rather than simply doing a matching activity based on the exercise we had just completed, I offered the following options and gave the learners ten minutes with a partner to choose the tasks they wanted to do:

Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Play a pelmanism/memory game with the 'verb + noun' collocations.	Test your partner: give a context (eg Syria) and ask your partner to remember the relevant collocation(s) and use these to talk about the situation.	Choose 3–5 collocations, and use these to extend one or more of the dialogues in the exercise for as long as you can.

I was delighted to observe that everyone seemed enthused by having a choice, and I was also interested to eavesdrop on the rationale behind each pair's choice of activity. The learners were able to see the inherent differentiation in the tasks, and they were making sensible decisions about whether to play with the language a bit more in Task 1, practise the language in a supported context in Task 2 or move into freer production in Task 3. Most pairs tried two of the options.

The next part of the coursebook unit involved an interesting reading, but I could see it was going to be problematic for my young and mixed-level class, because it was very long, focused on an unfamiliar historical context and

1 I'm not confident I've understood the text yet.	2 I'm confident about the text, and now I want to look at the language more closely.	3 I'm confident about both the text and the language; I want to develop my academic skills further.
Take your time to read the text again and get support from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ a classmate ■ the teacher ■ an English–English dictionary 	Do the exercises from the coursebook: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ex 4 word check: nouns ■ Ex 5 word check: verbs Answers will be provided; ask the teacher if you have any questions.	Make Cornell notes* and write a summary of the article: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Compare your work with a partner. ■ How are your summaries the same and different? *This technique, devised by Walter Pauk at Cornell University, had been taught in an earlier session.



featured a lot of advanced vocabulary. The ultimate productive goal of this stage of the lesson was to be able to explain the process described in the text, using a diagram for support. After an initial skim-reading of the text, I offered three options for activities which explicitly addressed a spectrum of needs and supported the learners towards the productive goal:

In this activity, the learners were invited to regroup so they could work with someone who had chosen the same option. In fact, the third option was not popular, even though there were a number of learners for whom this would have been suitable. I encouraged some individuals to attempt this more challenging task; learners sometimes need guidance to make the best selection, but the point is that they should have the final say in their choice of activity. If similar choices are frequently made available to the learners, they can build up the necessary experience and confidence to take risks and make more suitable selections.

Learner autonomy in homework and independent study

I also started offering a choice of homework and independent study activities to this same class to round off each lesson. In addition to signposting extra practice available in workbooks, on CD-ROMs or student websites, I set more personalised differentiated tasks. Some of these focused on *language*. For example:

- Borrow the class materials (eg pelmanism cards) and use these at home to review collocations and test yourself. These can also be provided in an uncut version for you to finish creating the materials yourselves.
- Rewrite your class notes from this lesson and make true personal sentences for new/difficult vocabulary/collocations.
- Use the target language to write five questions about today's topic to ask your host family or flatmate.

(In my teaching situation, some of the students are living with home-stay families; the third activity suggested above may not be possible in all contexts.)

Other tasks focused on *skills*, with optional reference to exam preparation. For example:

- Try doing an exam writing task (250 words), using as much of the new language from today's lesson as possible. Underline the target language that you have used before handing your writing in for marking:
- a **review** of a war story (film or book) you know (CAE, ESOL Skills for Life)
- an **article** about acceptable reasons for going to war (CAE, ESOL Skills for Life)
- an **essay** exploring whether war can ever be justified (IELTS, CAE, ESOL Skills for Life)

Still other tasks focused on *cultural awareness* (and skills), using either resources we had already worked with during the lesson, or new resources. For example:

- Watch another episode of *Derry Girls*, and write a review of the show (250 words). (www.channel4.com/programmes/derry-girls/on-demand/59741-005)
- Find out more about 'The Troubles' on the BBC history website: read and follow the links. (www.bbc.co.uk/history/topics/troubles_everyday_life)
- Visit the library to find a piece of fiction or poetry with a war theme and read this: eg *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Killing Fields*, or Rupert Brooke's poetry.

In my teaching context, this homework is optional, although there was regular take-up from motivated learners. In particular, I had one learner who loved to write and who also appreciated reading recommendations. Many of my learners were going on to university in the next year, and I frequently pointed out that they would need to undertake independent research and study like this as part of their degree course.

Learner autonomy in collaboration with home-stay providers

The home-stay experience can be as important for personal and academic development in young people as language study and exam preparation in lessons. Over the last few years, I have introduced a scheme to enhance cultural awareness and reinforce course content through semi-structured interactions between teenagers on an intensive summer course in the UK and their host families, via a learning journal which suggests nightly conversation

topics and activities (related to coursebook units) to explore around the dinner table. For example:

Coursebook unit topic: The age of information	
Monday	Do you think young people are addicted to technology? What rules do you have about screen-time in the classroom and at home? Do you agree with these?
Tuesday	Share a favourite app or game with your host family. Then explore some language learning apps together. Can you find an app to help your hosts learn <i>your</i> language?
Wednesday	How would you manage without your phone? Make a plan for everyone in the house to reduce or eliminate their phone use for the next few days. On Sunday, you can compare results.
Thursday	Share your favourite books, magazines, blogs, etc. Why is reading important? In what ways is reading enjoyable for you?
Friday	Ask your hosts about our social programme destination tomorrow. Have they visited this place before? Do they have any recommendations for you?
Saturday & Sunday	When you return, talk about your Saturday social programme trip. Show photos. How did your plan to reduce phone use during the week go? Could you continue with this plan?

Of course, the learners are free to substitute or supplement these questions/activities with their own ideas. Interestingly, this initiative was also welcomed by their host families, who said they appreciated having some structure/purpose to their interactions with the learners. The journal also includes recurring themes for self-reflection related to vocabulary, pronunciation, culture, relationships and progress-monitoring. Only minimal written responses are required, although the learners can do more if they wish; the emphasis is on participation and reflection.

The learning journal is introduced as part of the course induction, including information about the rationale:

- promotion of cross-cultural awareness;
- opportunities to practise speaking and listening skills, and improve pronunciation;
- opportunities to raise awareness of topics on the IELTS exam, develop opinions and rehearse explaining your own point of view.

We also explain that, at the end of the course, we will award three prizes to the learners who have the most beautiful, most thoughtful and most creative learning journals.

The checking of journals is included as a regular activity in the weekly course schedule, to ensure that the learners are engaged with them and also to share any interesting ideas which have come up. Each weekly session includes the same basic elements:

- 1 Time to update the learning journal, if this has not already been done.

- 2 Pairwork comparing one specific aspect of the journal and an activity to follow, eg comparison of language learning apps from Tuesday's activity in the example above.
- 3 An IELTS exam practice speaking task, based on the same specific aspect of the journal explored in activity 2, eg if technology was the focus, then this could be a Speaking Task 2 topic which relates specifically to how the learners use their phones. The learners can practise this in pairs.
- 4 An independent research activity which the learners can complete using their phones or the class computers. This is most often content-based; specific web addresses are supplied and the learners can find out more about a weekly topic, eg by watching a short TED talk. Further opportunities for pairwork can be included in this activity, eg via a jigsaw listening.

While the class is busy working on these activities, there is some time for individuals to meet with the teacher on a one-to-one basis for a few minutes' tutorial, to check on progress, receive feedback on speaking or writing, etc. Turns can be rotated throughout the class during the course.

Word games such as Scrabble are also always available to support spelling and vocabulary and to provide a change of pace and interaction patterns.

Because the teacher is busy with one-to-one meetings during this time, the learners are expected to work autonomously and independently on these tasks, and they can choose which tasks to do in which order.



Incorporating learner choice during lessons and for homework or independent study clearly supports differentiation and promotes independent learning. It also opens up opportunities for a productive dialogue between teacher and learner to emerge, either informally or formally. Taking this approach to planning lessons and courses has worked well for me and for my learners, and it has not been overly taxing to provide the various options. In fact, I am feeling quite excited about finding more ways to include choices which cater for the different needs and interests of everyone in the class. ■

Dellar, H and Walkley, A *Innovations Advanced* Thomson Heinle 2007
Impact sampler www.e-digitaleditions.com/ii/740745-impact-sampler-uk



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