
Invited Teaching Issues

Fostering Autonomy: Helping Learners Take Control

Hayo Reinders*

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As teachers we take delight and pride in seeing our learners succeed, not just in our classes but also in their personal lives and into the future. Much of this depends on their ability to 'see the bigger picture'. Learning is hard and to stick with it, even when there is no teacher around, requires finding reasons to put in the effort. Learners are not often asked to do this and so don't develop the skill to question why they are doing what they are doing. It is therefore important to consider ways to give learners greater control over their learning, and to do so in such a way that prepares, supports and ultimately empowers them to become more autonomous (Reinders, 2020). In this article we will look at practical ways to help learners become aware of their own and teachers' reasons for learning and see how this focus on personal learning aims forms an ongoing, iterative (recurring) part of the autonomous learning process.

Key words: learner autonomy, self-directed learning, planning, motivation, monitoring

*Author: Hayo Reinders, Professor, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, 126 Pracha Uthit Rd, Bang Mot, Thung Khru, Bangkok 10140, Thailand. Email: info@innovationinteaching.org

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1. THE BIG PICTURE: WHAT DO I WANT TO ACHIEVE?

Understanding why we learn helps with setting meaningful, long-term goals and also helps with maintaining motivation (Huang & Benson, 2013). We know that successful learners think about what they want to achieve and then plan accordingly (Griffiths, 2015). This means that they are proactive and more likely to feel - and be - in control of their own learning (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). Although some learners may naturally be more adventurous or resourceful when it comes to their learning, all learners can be encouraged to think of what they would like to achieve and be supported in developing this into a clear set of goals. Depending on the age of your learners, below are several 'Try This' ideas you could use as prompts.

Try this:

Write a list of reasons people learn languages on the board and then ask everyone individually to prioritise these for themselves. Another option is to show 'video testimonials' of language learners' experiences. The Victorian State Government in Australia has 20 of these available online (and also offers some useful fact sheets on 'why to learn...' for several languages), but you can of course also create your own with some of your older students.

Brainstorm countries/places/people learners would like to visit/communicate with and perhaps those they have already had some success with (have them share stories of speaking with native speakers on holiday, for example).

Try this:

As an extension of the above, give learners a number of situations in which they might be able to use the language (such as starting up a penpal exchange) and ask them choose those that most appeal to them.

Try this:

With younger learners, ask them to choose a TV/cartoon/book character they want to be like in the future.

The aim of the above is to get learners to think about what they will be able to do and the type of person they can become through learning the language. Educational psychologist Dara Feldman refers to this as setting 'character goals' and it is a useful technique to create a positive classroom atmosphere (Feldman, 2013). It is remarkable how many learners have never really considered (or been asked about) the benefits of knowing another

language and simply sit in class without a clear picture of where they are heading. It can be eye-opening for them to realise there are reasons for all the hard work.

Not all learners will be able to verbalise specific goals, or they may not be able to think of any language-related goals. However, once given some ideas, most will have strong opinions to share!

Try this:

You could use the following as starting points for a discussion about the benefits of learning a language:

Do you know someone who speaks more than one language? Why did they learn another language and what do they use the language for? In what ways do they benefit from knowing another language?

Next, you could ask them whether any of the reasons may be useful to them too. For example, if they have a friend who speaks another language and who can watch instructions on YouTube videos to learn their favourite dance style, this may be a practical benefit they can identify with.

You could also draw on one of the many lists available online, such as the '100 reasons for learning another language' from Lingolearn, and ask your learners to select all those that appeal to them.

Try this:

Alternatively, you could give learners some, perhaps deliberately somewhat provocative, statements to respond to, such as: "Learning another language will make you smarter."

You can then use these as a starting point for a discussion to identify reasons learners can identify with. For example, they may suggest that learning vocabulary strengthens your memory skills or that speaking in another language boosts your confidence. Ask your learners to make a note of those benefits that appeal to them so they can include them in their own goals in the next steps.

An important point is to think of goals that learners are likely to be able to achieve. Nothing breeds success like success and having the expectation of success (what cognitive psychologists call 'the expectancy component') will encourage more involvement and is more likely to lead to actual success. This is something you may want to explicitly share with your students, so that they understand why you are asking them to consider their own

goals.

Goals do not necessarily have to be formulated in a formal, ‘dry’ way. Especially with younger learners, goals can be couched in terms of an adventure, a quest, a journey, or an expedition (Nunan, 2010). During the initial brainstorming phase, let your learners’ imagination run a bit wild! The main point is to make the goals as specific as possible. Learners need to imagine themselves having certain skills and being able to do certain things. The more they can bring this image alive, the better.

Try this:

An activity that works well with younger learners is to hand out a set of cards with famous characters, from Dora the Explorer, to Moana, to Superman (whatever is culturally and age-appropriate) and let children choose their favourite. Next, ask them what kinds of things these characters do, like finding treasures, saving people, building things. Now ask them what skills this requires, such as reading a map, solving problems with others, explaining to others how to do things, and so on. Discuss how these involve different language skills and how they can learn those in class.

Especially with younger learners it is also important to consider what ‘rewards’ await when goals are met. How will success be recognised and shared? Perhaps your learners can make their own suggestions and add these to their plans.

2. THE NEXT STEP: RECORDING IT

The initial discussion is a great starting point to fire up your learners and encourage their creativity. The next step is to help them commit to a set of personal aspirations by formulating these in such a way that they can be shared with others and referred to throughout the course. How you do this of course depends on the age of your learners.

With younger students, a good follow-up activity to the one offered in the ‘try this’ tip above, is to ask them to create a treasure map and to visualise their course as a language learning adventure in which their personal goals are treasures, and you are there to provide clues and directions. Teaching methods like ‘Whole Brain Teaching’ use scoreboards to record progress (often in terms of improvement, not merely ability!). The steps or stages of improvement could be linked to individuals’ goals. With older learners a roadmap may be a useful metaphor and with older teens a learning contract may be appropriate. Whichever method you choose, committing goals to paper (or some other format) has been shown to increase motivation, and sharing goals and reflecting on them throughout the learning process have been shown to sustain it.

Learners may not have experienced this type of goal-setting and recording before and it is likely that they will need guidance. Here are some useful techniques:

- Show some examples of both clear and vague goals and ask learners to notice the differences.
- Ask them to rewrite some examples of vague goals.
- Turn negative goals ('not make so many mistakes in...') into positive ones ('make my readers clearly understand my message...').

Especially younger learners love pictures and drawings, so ask them to brighten up their treasure maps and roadmaps with their own designs and then have them display these around the classroom. Being able to point at them during class is an excellent way of reminding learners of the 'bigger picture'.

Try this:

Writing Down SMART Goals

Smart goals are those that are:

S = Specific

M = Measurable

A = Attainable

R = Relevant, Rigorous, Realistic, and Results Focused

T = Timely and Trackable

A useful way of writing down SMART goals is to use a sentence structure like:

I want to...(outcome/behaviour)

By...(date)

So I will...(actions)...

SMART is a useful reminder when checking learners' goals and when giving feedback. You can also ask learners to ask each other about their goals using SMART questions such as 'What will you do?' (S), 'How will you know if you have achieved your goals?' (M), 'Are you sure you can do this?' (A), 'How will this help you?' (R), and 'by when will you do this?' (T).

The format you choose for the learners to record their goals is not so important; this could be online or on paper. Goals could be written down or visualised using drawings or

in any other way that is appropriate for your learners.

The key point is that it should be easy for learners regularly to look at and revise their goals. For this reason, it is useful to consider where learners will keep their goals, such as on a poster on the classroom wall, in a personal folder, or in an online portfolio.

Personally, I always like to ask my learners to look at their overall goals at the beginning of each lesson. This is to remind them that we are not learning for the sake of learning, but that we have specific, personal goals that we are working towards. This is going to be one of your key motivators throughout the course. (Dean – Auckland)

Try this:

Turning Goals into an Adventure

Ask learners to create a map and add challenges, which could be things that learners expect will make learning difficult for them, such as finding it difficult to remember new words, or becoming bored. They could visualise these as trolls and monsters. You could also ask them to add in things that will help, such as their friends, their family or their teachers. They could picture the adults as other characters. I've seen such exercises turn into beautiful plans that look more like board games than anything. (One young learner of mine had drawn me as a monster. When I asked her if she thought of me as scary, she said 'no, no! you are a lovely monster!')

Try this:

Learning Contracts

Learning contracts include elements such as goals, sub-goals (or steps), and a timeline/target date. More extensive examples include the types of activities learners will engage in and for how many hours, available resources and strategies learners will employ, likely obstacles to success. A Google image search will show many attractively-designed examples you can adapt and provide to your learners as a template.

3. FROM THE BIG PICTURE TO EVERYDAY LEARNING TASKS

Having a clear idea of one's reasons for learning a language is an important first step, but is only likely to have a significant influence if daily learning activities can be shown to link to broader goals. This is where as teachers we play an important role in:

- 1) Showing how smaller tasks build up to bigger ones and how these help us to achieve what we want;
- 2) Showing the most helpful ways of approaching a task.

It is of course unlikely that the goals learners set themselves will all be able to be achieved within the duration of the course. Also, it may not be possible to accommodate all different goals. Regardless, it is quite likely that many of the elements of the course will contribute to the learning journey in different ways. As teachers we know what the different building blocks are that make up sentences, fluent speech and extensive listening skills, for example, but for students these links are not necessarily clear. Knowing why it is helpful to learn fixed expressions, practise pronunciation, or watch movies with subtitles in the target language, may help learners to see what in the literature is referred to as the ‘value component’, or whether they consider the task to be important, and in this way become more engaged.

In addition to showing how individual tasks are linked to develop integrated skills and achieve learning goals, it is important to show the immediate outcome and benefit of a task. It can be difficult—and it certainly is unnecessary—always to show a link between individual tasks and broader learning goals, but we can still show the intrinsic value of a particular task. Consider the difference between:

“Today we are going to learn how to use the conditional”

and

“Have a look at this short video. What is this person trying to do? Why is she not succeeding? How could she get her meaning across?”

The second example could lead to a demonstration of how the conditional could have helped the person express her meaning. This will help learners see why they are learning about this feature and the benefits of knowing it. Research has shown that teachers in all subjects do this surprisingly little (Ellis, 2017). The benefit is that over time, learners can be asked to figure out themselves what the purpose of a particular task of the language is and how it can help them to work towards their goals by posing questions like:

What are you hoping to learn from this task?

How will this help you reach your goals?/What will you be able to do with this new knowledge/skill?

What will tell you if you have learned it?

After completing a task, learners can be encouraged to reflect on their new skills and

how these will help them. It is important to show learners this is a time to recognise their work and their achievements.

Try this:**Reflecting on your learning**

Ask your learners to consider what they have learned from a task, for example:

- Think of three situations that you can now handle yourself in. Share and compare these with your neighbour.
- Do a role-play to act them out.
- Look at your learning plan and think of ways in which what you have just learned will help you achieve your goals.

Learners could be asked to record their new skills in their portfolios, to cross off items on their treasure map (see above), or use a checklist. Depending on the age of the learners you can use stickers to indicate progress in a workbook, or offer badges. It does not have to be you who does this, learners can be encouraged to hand them out to each other and themselves.

4. CHOOSING THE RIGHT TASKS

Of course, a lot depends on the types of tasks learners are asked to engage in. Boring, repetitive, context-less ‘exercises’ are not likely to work well as anchors for reflective engagement (Van Lier, 2014). It will be clear by now that for learners to understand the ‘why’ of their learning, they need to be given the freedom and support to reflect on their own goals, as well as then engage in tasks that enable them to pursue those goals. In other words: highly structured tasks that leave no room for learner choice are less likely to lead to the development of learner autonomy. Clearly, this is where teachers will need to balance the demands of a set curriculum with the flexibility needed to accommodate different learner needs and goals.

One distinction was drawn by educational researcher Carol Dweck in her work on ‘goal orientation theory’ in the 1980s (Dweck, 2017). She referred to tasks as having either performance goals, i.e. to demonstrate competence, or learning goals, to increase competence (“I can learn it”). The former is characterised by anxiety to fail and the latter a willingness to take risks.

Performance goals are not without benefits, as they can help learners to gain practice and in this way increase speed and accuracy of their performance. However, generally speaking,

learning goals are more likely to lead to personal investment on the part of your learners.

Try this:

Reflecting on learning goals

Consider your last lesson: to what extent did the tasks reflect performance goals and to what extent learning goals? Are you happy with this balance? How can you build in a progression (development) towards enabling your learners to 1) work more on learning goals, and 2) set their own learning goals?

One way to do this is to print out your upcoming lesson plans and lay them out on a table. Next, 1) categorise activities as primarily reflecting performance or learning goals, and 2) draw links from each activity to the next, across your lesson plans, to visualise how each activity builds up to the next (or maybe not!). In this way, you can assure yourself that you are moving your learners in the direction of greater autonomy at the right pace. With older learners you discuss your findings and ask if they feel they are ready to take more responsibility or if they want to take things more slowly.

All language teaching methods and approaches lend themselves to including a focus on the language learning process. Some may more naturally allow you to do so; for example, in task-based activities (TBLT) focus on achieving genuine communicative outcomes, which may make it easier to relate the activity to learners' real-life goals. Nonetheless, just as it is possible to ignore reflecting on the benefits of a task in a TBLT class (and thus miss the opportunity to identify learning goals), so it is possible in a more grammar-oriented curriculum to hand over control to your learners. What matters is how you implement a method or approach, not so much the method itself. This has the benefit that even where you are restricted by a prescribed curriculum or textbook, you can still augment your lessons.

One way of creating a learning-oriented purpose to a class is to start from the learners' goals, as discussed at the start of this article, and create one or more scenarios from these to provide a backdrop to the course. The term 'scenario' was introduced in the literature on self-directed learning in the 1960s and 1970s to encourage learners, who might not be supported by a teacher at all times, to see and stay focused on the bigger picture of their learning. A scenario can be an over-arching story, a project, or—for younger learners—an adventure. As an example, educational researcher Johanna Kearns in her book 'Designs for Self-instruction' (1998) describes how a class had to create (and video record) a news bulletin for an historical event. Like most scenarios, this one involves multiple, integrated skills (history, presentation skills, research skills, etc.) and communication and collaboration between learners. Throughout the semester, individual tasks are related to the

overall goal.

Try this:*Scenarios for younger learners*

The first step is to agree on a scenario, or for younger learners, a ‘story’, or ‘adventure’. You can suggest scenarios based on topics that have come up in class so far during the year (e.g. ‘space travel’ or ‘ecologies’) or that are a particular theme for the school (e.g. ‘diversity’).

For younger learners you may want to provide worked-out scenarios for them to choose from. For example, you could suggest a ‘mission’ your class will embark on to save aliens that have landed on earth and that need your help to survive on our planet. Your class could be the team of scientists that will need to figure out such things as how to communicate with the aliens, what they need for food and oxygen, and how to help them return home.

The next step is to create teams and individual roles. In the example above, one team might focus on how to approach the aliens without scaring them (the ‘first encounter’ team) and another on measuring their vitals (the ‘medical’ team). Within each team, you could have different ‘jobs’ and let learners choose based on their interest. Some roles may emphasise more reflective skills (such as finding information about oxygen in Earth’s atmosphere in an encyclopedia) and others more productive skills (such as talking to the aliens), to suit different types of learners (e.g. introverted/extraverted) and different skill levels (those who are more or less confident speaking in public, for example).

Depending on class size, you could have 4-5 teams with 4-6 members each.

Try this:*Scenarios for teens*

You can ask older learners to create their own scenarios, rather than providing them. You may want to propose a theme (perhaps something that aligns with the curriculum) and give them general guidelines of what you expect as a product (a presentation, a report, or a recommendation). With older learners there are many opportunities to create links between subjects across the school.

For example, within the theme of ‘biodiversity’, it is likely learners will need to draw on topics such as biology, science, physics, politics, and communication. By letting them create their own project, they are likely to be more engaged.

5. REVISITING THE WHY

Our reasons for learning change over time and it is important to encourage learners to revisit their goals. You can prompt a brief discussion by asking questions like:

- What have you learned this week/month/module that has helped you toward your goals?
- How far on your way are you?
- What are you now able to do that you were not able to do last week/month?
- What area do you feel you have not improved as much in as you would have liked?
- Are your goals still relevant?

Learning a language is a long-term effort and motivation levels are bound to rise and fall over time. This self-reflection stage reminds learners of their reasons for learning and also helps to raise awareness of their achievements, which can help sustain motivation. Below is a comment from a young learner, demonstrating the types of insights this type of reflection can bring:

I think that I have lived up to my contract because I have done what I said I would, I've read aloud, written stories, practised articulations by speaking a lot with Michael. My contract was to get a better articulation, better spelling, write some stories, and I think I have managed to be better in all of the three items. (Karsten, self-evaluation of contract, 4th year of English).

6. WHY THIS WORKS

The extent to which learners feel they have some say over their learning is determined in part by their ability to propose meaningful, personal goals and the degree of freedom and support they enjoy in doing so. This is reflected in the strong focus on learner choice in many of the recent educational models that aim to develop '21st century learning skills' and 'future readiness', all of which involve the ability to reflect and critically engage. Setting, recording, sharing and reflecting on goals all have been shown to be particularly useful ways of implementing such approaches to learning and they have been shown to have a major impact on motivation. Studies in goal-setting theory have demonstrated that having specific goals not only increases the chances of achieving those goals, but also heightens learners' intrinsic motivation.

This is in particular the case for process goals, as opposed to outcome goals. The former

describes what behaviours a learner will engage in, the latter what successful and unsuccessful outcomes look like. Because outcome goals may lead to anxiety and demotivation when the outcomes are not achieved, process goals are preferred. Similarly, goals need to be achievable. If learners see that certain desired outcomes are within their grasp, they are more likely to expend the necessary effort. This ‘expectancy component’ triggers engagement through the expectation that this will lead to success.

Engaging learners in figuring out their own path shows them their choices and actions directly impact their success. In this sense, goal-setting not only serves the practical purpose of managing the learning process, but also provides a crucial step in developing learners’ autonomy.

Applicable levels: Early childhood, elementary, secondary, tertiary

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