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Learner Ownership of Learning

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

In this issue we present articles on the Focus Topic "Learner Ownership of Learning." The submissions for this issue were blind reviewed by two education experts, in addition to staff from *The Language Educator* and ACTFL. We thank Aleidine J. Moeller, Edith S. Greer Professor and Coordinator of Secondary Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for writing an introduction to this important topic.

Developing learners' ability to manage their own learning is integral to building language proficiency and requires that learners clearly understand what they are learning and why they are learning it (Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017). There is general agreement that autonomous learners accept responsibility and take ownership for their own learning, share in identifying learning goals, actively and positively engage in learning tasks, and reflect on and evaluate their own learning (Holec 1981, Little 1991). When learners are actively engaged in the learning process, motivation is ensured, and temporary challenges and setbacks in language learning can be overcome.

This issue of *The Language Educator* addresses questions such as: What are the key factors in developing ownership in language learning? What does it mean to be an autonomous learner? What are the key principles that undergird autonomous learning? How does a teacher create learner ownership in the language learner? How do we position learners to think about their own learning and make connections inside and outside the classroom to monitor their learning development? Why and how does learner ownership build and sustain motivation in learners to increase language proficiency?

One of the key factors to consider in developing ownership of learning is to build on the existing knowledge, skills, and experiences of the learner. This promotes a personal connection to the content, connects what the learner already knows with what is to be learned, and individualizes the learning process. Self-management, or the ability to connect new learning with what is already known, will more likely produce the desired learning outcomes.

How can this occur in the language classroom? Scholars have determined that sharing in identifying learning objectives, reviewing the progression of skills, selecting learning strategies, monitoring the learning process, and ultimately evaluating one's language progress are key characteristics that ensure language development.

Two key principles in building learner ownership and autonomy are learner involvement and learner reflection (Little, 2017). Learner involvement entails accepting responsibility and investing effort in the learning process; learner reflection entails planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment. An important feature in language development is the social, interactive dimension.

Rooted in constructivist learning theory, language acquisition is socially constructed through interactive learning tasks that occur in pairs and through group work (Vygotsky, 1978).

Learners set individual learning goals within the learning resources of the class and language acquisition occurs through interactive language practice and rehearsal. Such a framework promotes self-motivation as it is reliant on "feeling free and volitional in one's actions" (Deci, 1996, p.2).

Goal Setting

Goal setting is a major factor in the motivational process, especially when goals are meaningful, personal, and proximal (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007). Goals determine where learners' working memory capacity is being allocated.

Too often learners are seen as subjects of assessment, not users of assessments. The learner must be considered the primary user of assessment information. When students understand the goal of a task, they invest themselves in the task, there is ownership in the learning as they assess their own learning and identify gaps in their learning. Aldermann asserts that "Goal setting influences learning and motivation by providing a target and information about how well one is doing" (Aldermann, 2004, p. 105).

The NCSSFL/ACTFL Can-Do Statements compel learners to self-assess their ability to use language through functional, performance-based learning tasks by involving them first-hand in the assessment of their own learning. The Can-Do Statements are designed to guide teachers and learners in the language learning process to ensure continual language development. The learners adopt a "not yet there" approach as they seek to increase and deepen their proficiency that promotes a growth mindset and encourages persistence to not give up.

As a byproduct of this process, learners develop ownership in their own learning as they reflect on, talk about, and write about if the goal was met and at what level of proficiency. By using standards (NCSSFL/ACTFL Can-Do Statements) as learning targets, or long-term goals for achievement, learners progressively internalize standards when comparing the standards with personal abilities and growth. In tracking personal growth according to content standard–based long-term goals, the learner is also able to analyze at what level of quality the goal, or standard, is being achieved.

When learners do not understand the goal of a task or do not invest themselves in a task, there is a lack of ownership in the learning. The value of the learning task is diminished, thereby affecting their motivation to engage in that task. For that reason, it is crucial that teachers introduce the NCSSFL/ACTFL Can-Do Statements as short- and long-term functional language and cultural goals in ways that involve learners actively and metacognitively in planning a learning task.

For example, if the short-term goal is "I can introduce myself in formal and informal situations using the appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors," teachers can encourage the learners to select someone to whom the learners would like to introduce themselves. This provides the important personal choice option that builds motivation in the learner.

To involve the learner metacognitively in the learning process, the teachers task learners with the following question: What are the skills and language you will need to achieve this goal?

As students in pairs begin to unpack this question, they identify the language and cultural behaviors needed to introduce themselves to someone: How do I greet this person? Do I shake hands? Do I introduce myself formally or informally? Do I address them by their first or last names, or use titles? How do I open the conversation? Which questions are appropriate to ask? Is it appropriate to ask them out for coffee? How do I end the conversation?
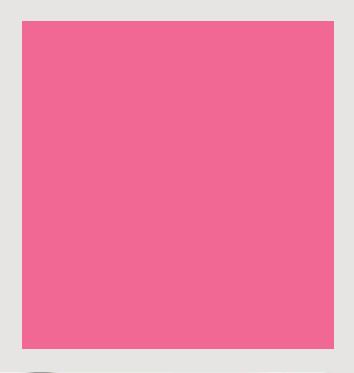
As learners realize the complexity of this task, they become aware of the language and cultural nuances they need to successfully complete this task. Through this metacognitive exercise, learners, by recognizing the requisite knowledge and skills required, begin to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Connecting learning tasks with students' goals increases the value of the task and thus increases motivation. When learners attach personal value to learning tasks, the tasks become purposeful and learners are more willing to exert effort to achieve their goals. Goal setting directs learner attention and cognitive efforts on achieving a specific learning objective and fosters a higher degree of effort from learners as goals become more challenging (emerging function), encourages persistence as more challenging goals require more time on task, and elicits a sense of arousal in students as their degree of intrinsic interest in the subject area rises (Ziegler & Moeller, 2012).

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, that is, the belief that a person will succeed at something, is a major component of motivation (Zimmerman, 2000), a critical factor in language learning as gaining proficiency requires consistent and long-term investment of time and effort. Self-efficacy beliefs determine an individual's level of effort, persistence, and emotional reactions to success or failure (Zimmerman, 2000).

Research has shown that positive attributions such as study strategies, goal setting, and instructor-guided self-assessment skills can be taught to students (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Molden, 2017). If learners view their ability as dependent on effort (attributions), they are more likely to remain motivated and persistent in attempting to master their language learning objective. Carol Dweck (2016) advanced a theory dubbed "growth mindset" that maintains that qualities can be fostered through "efforts, strategies, and help from others," versus a "fixed mindset" where one believes that "intelligence or talent

are simply fixed traits and that talent alone creates success—without effort."

Too often language learning is regarded as a special talent, one acquired through innate abilities rather than skills cultivated through effort. Learner engagement in self-assessment fosters metacognitive processes in learners to not only think about what the student is doing to improve, but also why the student is doing it. These self-assessments help learners internalize that ability is a result of effort and strategies they use which ultimately motivate learners to self-regulate their own learning by internalizing the standards upon which the self-assessments are based.

To make the connection between effort and gains in language development, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines make transparent to learners their incremental gains and improvement in language development that allow learners to track and measure their language learning progress. These guidelines, when used correctly, encourage learners to reflect and celebrate increasing language successes that promote a growth mindset.

Learning/Learner-Centered Environment

The pivotal role of the teacher is to create a learning climate that supports and promotes learner ownership of learning. Much like mathematics and science, second language study can evoke anxiety and fear as it is often regarded as difficult or is viewed as an innate talent that is not accessible to all. One of the major tasks of the teacher is to create an engaging and comfortable space where learners can collaborate, take risks, view errors as indicators of learning rather than mistakes, are empowered with voice and choice as regards learning goals and have decision-making power to choose how to demonstrate their learning.

When learners are engaged in meaningful, authentic learning tasks that are carefully scaffolded into the hands of the student and structured to ensure success for all learners, learners feel success and experience achievement and motivation that will foster continued and sustained effort. When learners see their own progress, they are encouraged to take ownership of their work. To foster the belief that current ability is the result of effort, students should be recognized for personal improvement.

In a language classroom that values learner autonomy and promotes ownership in the learning process, the teacher provides the much-needed organization support to assist learners to identify and develop the skills needed to support and increase learning (Brey & McClaskey, 2016). When learners are left without organizational guidance, learning is significantly reduced.

Teachers are tasked with creating a learner-centered curriculum that engages learners fully in all modes of communication

(interpretive, interpersonal, presentational) through authentic, meaningful cognitive and affective learning tasks that emulate real world language encounters in the target culture. Designing tasks that use group work can both lower anxiety as learners engage in symmetric peer interactions (Moshman, 2005) and establish an atmosphere conducive to flow, a mental state where learners are fully involved and absorbed in the learning. Such a learner-centered, personalized approach underscores individual development rather than comparison with others and is conducted within an interactive framework of pair and group work that supports socio-cultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It is important to note that the use of the target language is integral to the development of language proficiency within the context of spontaneous and authentic communication.

The most effective language acquisition results from learners' sustained language input and opportunities to use the target language in authentic and spontaneous contexts that meet the learners' own communicative purposes. This requires that learners have access to and participate in language communication inside and outside the classroom. Little (2015) posits that "the development of learners' capacity to manage their own learning is integral to the development of their L2 proficiency; effective learning depends on target language use that is spontaneous and authentic, communicative, metacognitive, and self-regulatory" (p. 11).

Technology-Enhanced Learning

Digital media has provided a multitude of affordances to support the development of language learning. New opportunities for language learning, especially informal learning that is driven by one's personal interest in various socially constructed contexts, offer an effective pathway to building learner ownership. Informal and formal electronic communication can provide effective ways to practice and acquire language that motivate learners as they pursue dialogic opportunities in venues of their own choosing, thereby strengthening intrinsic motivation and learner ownership as learners are in control of their own learning.

Such socially-constructed learning maximizes incidental learning as the target language input and output are practiced in real time for authentic personal communication. This provides learners with much needed agency over their own learning within and outside the language classroom. As digital tools provide increasing opportunities to build relationships with others through language, it is critical that learners gain self-regulation skills that can be utilized and employed outside the language classroom to ensure a continual pathway to increased proficiency.

As learners gain more ownership of their own learning, they develop an understanding that learning is the means to its own end—not the grade. This internal motivation and ownership in the learning in turn leads to higher achievement and increased self-efficacy.

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