



Teacher/Learner Training for Autonomy

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Abstract

There is a mismatch between the learner's and the teacher's agendas and as a result: while the teacher is busily teaching something, the learner is very often focusing on something else. (Nunan, 1999) This is just because the knowledge is transferred unidirectionally. Teachers have dual duty; transferring the knowledge and training the learners on how to access and make use of that knowledge. Teacher training on how to encourage their learners to take control of their own learning, in other words how to make them autonomous learners is highly essential. Autonomy refers to the learner's broad approach to the learning process, rather than a particular mode of teaching. How can English teachers train their learners to learn English then? Feurstein's (1980) Mediation Theory tells us that it is the role of the teacher to help learners to find ways of moving into their next level of understanding. Teachers need to take on the roles as; advisors, facilitators, consultants, partners and joint problem-solvers. They need to raise awareness on different approaches to learning and help learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies they will need in order to progress. However, teachers are in need to be trained to take on such roles. This paper will give the theoretical background of teacher/ learner training for autonomy in English Language classes. Then the teacher training activities for the roles of a foreign language teacher will be given with examples and finally, learner training for autonomous learning activities will be displayed.

Key Words: English Language Teaching, Autonomous Learning, First Language, Zone of Proximal Development

Introduction

Learners have a broad approach to learning and this depends on a process rather than a particular mode of teaching. Foreign language teachers usually believe that foreign language learning is a painful process and they need to teach most of the time to help the learner grasp the basic structure of the language. Students, on the other hand, wish to learn the language in a relaxed atmosphere where they can interact. Learners come to class with different expectations. Nunan (1999) believes that there is a mismatch between the learners' and the teachers' agendas. Teachers need to change their beliefs and attitudes towards teaching. They need to train their learners on learning while teaching a foreign language. This brings in the question whether instruction can assist language acquisition or not. The non-cognitive approach sees language as 'picked up' or acquired by natural processes in which the teacher should not interfere (Krashen 1981,1982). Ellis (1984) takes the midway and believes that instruction helps only when the learner is ready to acquire the form being taught, when the form is in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) of the learner.

Reuven Feuerstein's (1979) Mediation Theory tells us that it is the role of the teacher to help learners to find ways of moving into their next level of understanding the language. Teachers are mediators like parents who help children to promote learning.

Thus it is important to see the learner as an active participant in the learning process that is interactive and not unidirectional. Teachers need to take different roles according to the teaching/learning taking place in class. They might become coordinators, coaches, learner trainers, diagnosticians and a language learners.

How do we train foreign language teachers to become mediators?

English Language Teachers are educated at the universities where they are introduced to both the theory and practice of the profession. The methods and methodology given as pre-service knowledge are expected to be transferred to their in-service teaching practice. However, there is no single method that works best just because every class, every teacher and every learner is not the same. There are individual differences. Therefore trainers need to raise awareness on individual differences and do explicit training on autonomous learning.

Awareness on individual differences has an utmost importance in foreign language teaching since it brings a difference to the methods they choose. Each learner adopts a different attitude towards foreign language learning. Recent studies claim that aptitude is a trainable concept (Robinson, 2007).

How do we train our students for better learning then?

Training can be done in two ways; implicitly or explicitly. In implicit training students are instructed to do the activities which make use of their strategies but they are not told why they do such activities. With explicit training on the other hand, students are told why they do that activity to raise awareness on how to deal with such situations outside the class.

The table below displays different models of training to help students become autonomous learners.

SSBI* Model (Cohen, 1998)	CALLA** Model (Chamot, 2005; Chamot et al., 1999)	Grenfell & Harris (1999)
Teacher as diagnostician: Helps students identify current strategies and learning styles.	Preparation: Teacher identifies students' current learning strategies for familiar tasks.	Awareness raising: Students complete a task, and then identify the strategies they used.
Teacher as language learner: Shares own learning experiences and thinking processes.	Presentation: Teacher models, names, explains new strategy; asks students if and how they have used it.	Modeling: Teacher models, discusses value of new strategy, makes checklist of strategies for later use.
Teacher as learner trainer: Trains students how to use learning strategies.	Practice: Students practice new strategy; in subsequent strategy practice, teacher fades reminders to encourage independent strategy use.	General practice: Students practice new strategies with different tasks.
Teacher as coordinator: Supervises students' study plans and monitors difficulties.	Self-evaluation: Students evaluate their own strategy use immediately after practice.	Action planning: Students set goals and choose strategies to attain those goals.
Teacher as coach: Provides ongoing guidance on students' progress.	Expansion: Students transfer strategies to new tasks, combine strategies into clusters, develop repertoire of preferred strategies.	Focused practice: Students carry out action plan using selected strategies; teacher fades prompts so that students use strategies automatically.
	Assessment: Teacher assesses students' use of strategies and impact on performance.	Evaluation: Teacher and students evaluate success of action plan; set new goals; cycle begins again.

Students can become active participants if we raise awareness on learning strategies.

Here is an example for reading:

Please read this text and try to understand it.

Daily Routine

Ben her sabah saat 06.00 da kalkarım. Saat 07.00 de kahvaltı ederim. Saat 07.30 da otobüse binerim. Saat 08.30 da Üniversiteye gelirim. Saat 09.00 da ders başlar. Saat 12.30 da öğlen yemeği yerim. Saat 15.30 da eve gelirim. Saat 17.00 de akşam yemeği yerim ve saat 21.00 de yatarımⁱ

Did you guess?

Did the title help you to guess?

Did you associate the words with the words you know?

Did you try to understand the word order -subject verb object?

This is what we do in our real life when we read the prospectus of the medicine prescribed for us.

In class, if students work on the text in pairs or in groups and share their ideas,

then they learn from one another. The teacher teaching such a text can raise awareness if he/she plans the stages before the lesson. Planning the stages of the reading lesson (guessing, previewing, skimming and scanning and getting the gist) and writing how this plan makes students use their reading strategies would require the knowledge given in the table above. A well trained teacher would plan carefully for all skills and would ask the students to reflect upon what they have learnt by giving them a checklist:

My reflection:

What I found easy:

What I found difficult:

What I will do the next time:

When do learners learn?

- Learners learn what is MEANINGFUL to them.
- Learners learn if the tasks are PERSONAL and UNIQUE to them.
- Learners learn better if they feel IN CONTROL of what they are learning.
- Learners learn in a SOCIAL CONTEXT through INTERACTION with other people.
- Learners learn better if they are encouraged to THINK.

If learners learn better with the techniques stated above, what could teaching strategies for a better learning environment be?

The mismatch between the learner and teacher agendas as stated above (Nunan, 1999) can be sorted out by discussing the syllabus with the students. In practice, teachers usually prepare the syllabus before the classes start and they do not consult their students. If the topics and books chosen by the teacher do not attract students' interests, then the classes are run with low motivation. Language teachers could start their classes by learning about their students' learning styles and strategies. Another useful teaching strategy could be talking about foreign language learning strategies. Teachers could do a simple vocabulary retention game to show them how different people remember/ memorize words by using different styles and strategies. For example, they can write or project ten words on board with their synonyms in L1 and give them on or two minutes to memorize them without writing. Then, the teacher can clear the words and ask them to tell either the word or the synonym when asked. It is a good idea to ask the students how they remembered the word. The teacher then can talk about several ways of memorizing/ remembering the new words.

Training learners to take control of their own learning is not easy especially in Turkey where students expect teachers to transfer knowledge and be more active in class. However, students like to be involved and be active if the topics are interesting and appealing. They like working on projects and preparing power point presentations. They like being creative and performing the stories they have written. They like puzzles and try hard to solve them. They like debating in the foreign language. We need to train our learners to take the responsibility of their learning not only in foreign language (English) but also in other subjects. Foreign language (English) learners in Turkey consider this course similar to other subject courses and expect the teacher, like other subject teachers, to transfer knowledge and they do not bother to access to more information on their own, despite the technology available to them. This attitude can be changed if teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards

autonomous learning change.

How can we measure autonomy? How do we know if our learners have become more autonomous and taken control of their learning?

Autonomous learning is not just learning on your own, it is also being efficient in making learning plans and setting goals. Therefore, teachers need to encourage students to make plans for further learning and guide them on how to do this. They also need a checking list to check upon autonomous learning:

- 1- Do learners make and use learning plans?
- 2- Do they participate in classroom decisions?
- 3- Do they reflect upon their learning?
- 4- Do they initiate exchanges in the target language?

In conclusion, second language learners progress at different levels due to cognitive social and affective differences (Chamot,1999).That's why the foreign language (English) teachers need to be trained on how to train their learners to learn in the best way that suits their learning styles and strategies.Learners also need to change their attitudes towards foreign language learning and be ready to become autonomous learners.

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ⁱ I get up at 06.00 every morning. At 07.00 I have breakfast. I get on the bus at 07.30. I come to the university at 08.30. The courses start at 09.00. I have lunch at 12.30. I come home at 15.30. I have dinner at 17.00. I go to bed at 21.00.