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Self-Directed Learning

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ABSTRACT

The classroom study forms the backbone of the language learning process for many learners. But it is the duty of the teacher to motivate students to engage in their self study. This paper examines four aspects of the learning process that self-directed learners are generally understood to be able to navigate: planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating; it then suggests ways in which teachers can foster these abilities in the language learning classroom. Teachers can help learners to assume more responsibility for their own learning and develop them as more effective language learners.

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Introduction

The classroom-based learning scenarios are only a small part of the overall process of learning a foreign language. In order to be successful, most language learners will have to engage in independent study to some degree to master a language. As the first step students should realize that they can only reach their full potential when they have the flexibility to study according to their own needs, learning styles, and interests. In these circumstances, the role of the teacher is vital. By providing support and guidance for learners, teachers can help their students develop the skills to be successful self-directed learners with clear goals, appropriate resources, and effective learning strategies.

The teacher has a vital role to play in this process, and that considerable steps towards greater learner autonomy in self-directed learning can be made through simple adaptations to classroom activities or the inclusion of short discussions and reflections. The initial step in the learning process is psychological training. While training the students psychologically, teachers must legitimize independent learning by showing that they approve of more self-directed learning behavior. Teachers must also help learners adjust to new roles for both learners and teachers by convincing learners that they are capable of successfully making their own learning decisions. Some innovative measures should be taken on the teaching methodology also. Teachers must provide opportunities for increased independence in the classroom through introducing elements of student choice into the curriculum and language tasks, developing learners' language awareness, and sharing their own knowledge of language learning to help learners solve learning problems effectively. It is obvious that to be successful, learners need some kind of training or preparation as they embark on self-directed learning, and that teachers are ideally placed to help learners develop the necessary skills. Psychological preparation is indispensable in the self-directed learning. Without that the teacher's attempt to prepare students to take more control over their learning process will not get the

expected result, any teacher looking to encourage effective self-directed learning should bear this in mind.

The learners can achieve a number of key skills if they successfully assume full control of the learning process. In order to achieve mastery in the language the students should be aware of the four phases of a self-directed learning: planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating. The central idea of reflection runs through all these phases. With less direct intervention from teachers to tell them where they may be going wrong, learners must make their own decisions based on critical reflection of their own situation. This requires a certain insight into the learning process, which a teacher can help them to develop. By developing these skills, it is hoped that learners who choose to engage in study outside of the classroom will be more focused and thus more successful in their endeavors.

Planning is a fundamental part in the learning process. Any account of self-directed learning will inevitably highlight the need for learners to plan what and how they are going to learn. In self-directed learning, the onus is on learners to analyze their own situation and decide on learning priorities. Learners have to take into account their wants and interests. For self-directed learning to be successful, learners must be engaged and motivated. Where language wants and needs do not converge, learners who feel they must study strictly according to extrinsic needs when their real interests lie elsewhere may find their motivation for independent study lacking. By broadening the concept of a needs analysis to include wants and interests, learners can become aware of potential mismatches in their choices and be better placed to deal with them if they arise.

Learners once determined which areas of language they want or need to focus on; the next step is to determine their current skill level. A learner who needs to be able to deliver a formal presentation in English and thinks he needs to work on his pronunciation may in fact have no significant problems in this area. Instead, he may be lacking the academic vocabulary necessary to transition between sections of his talk. By determining his current level in the skills identified in the needs analysis, the learner can then choose specific areas of language

on which to focus. This may be done by seeking teacher or peer feedback on written or spoken performance, or by completing a comprehension task in the case of reading or listening. If possible, a record of this activity should be kept to enable a smooth evaluation process once self-directed learning has been initiated.

Goal setting helps learners focus their study and break it down into manageable portions. When learners are able to analyse their own situation and current skill level, they are then able to set priorities and decide on specific goals for self-directed learning. Learners may have one or two overall goals, but may also choose to set themselves more manageable weekly goals which will help them achieve their more general goals. This can have benefits for motivation, as by making noticeable progress towards a specific goal, learners are more likely to want to continue studying.

There are plenty of resources available in the present world. Once learners have analysed their needs and set goals, they must also choose appropriate learning resources. Such resources may be one of two kinds: resources designed for language learning (textbooks, dictionaries, internet sites) or examples of authentic language use (newspapers, radio or TV programmes, podcasts, movies, proficient speakers of the language). In the case of the latter resource type, learners must also decide how they are going to use the chosen resources in a way that will help them achieve their goals. For this, it may be necessary for the teacher to model and have students experiment with certain learning strategies in class. It is important, however, that learners do not lose sight of their goals during this process; sometimes enthusiasm for a newly-found resource or strategy can throw learners off their goal focus. Once the “what” and the “how” of the self-directed learning have been decided upon, it is useful for learners to make some kind of formal record of their plans. This could take the form of a simple record of goals set, a more detailed plan in which weekly goals, materials, and study activities are laid out, or even a learning contract signed by both the learner and teacher stating that the learner will engage in a certain kind of study for a set time each week or month.

After completing a thorough planning process, learners are then ready to start implementing their plan. In cases where learners do opt to work predominantly on their own or without specific teacher guidance, it is useful for a clear record of study to be kept. This is for two reasons. By keeping a record of the work they are doing, learners will build up a kind of portfolio that can give them a degree of satisfaction with the work they are doing and motivate them to continue. At the same time, this record can also aid with monitoring and evaluating their learning as they progress through their plan. A learning record can be kept in a number of ways; learners should be encouraged to choose a method which suits their own preferences and the study they are doing. Some may choose a simple log of what has been studied and when, with titles of worksheets or chapters recorded, along with any test scores they may have. Others may prefer more detailed reflective diary entries.

Developing good monitoring skills involves encouraging both learners’ self-awareness and their awareness of the language they are learning. Keeping detailed records of learning, as mentioned above, is vital to this process. Some of these methods, such as task observations or recordings, may also be suitable for students focusing on their own learning processes. Effective monitoring is the key to good self-directed learning and ensures the recursive nature of the cycle. Learners who fail

to monitor their work may lose focus and waste time on study which does not sufficiently address the needs and goals they previously identified.

The final process which is considered vital for successful self-directed learning is that of evaluating the learning and progress being made. Whereas the monitoring strategies described above primarily examine the learning process, evaluating is often more concerned with the product of that learning process. Evaluation generally takes place once learners have been undertaking self-directed study for a certain period of time, usually at least a month. The main way in which an evaluation can be conducted is through a controlled comparison. This is only possible if learners have investigated and recorded their original skill level in their goal areas during the planning process and have kept a study record of the work they have been doing.

For example, having made a recording of a conversation on a certain topic before starting their study, they may now decide to record a similar conversation and compare the two recordings. By comparing their level after engaging in some study with that of their skill before embarking on self-directed learning, learners can determine whether the way they have been learning has had the desired effect on their language proficiency in the focus area. If this turns out not to be the case, they will have to examine their study plan and change it to better fit their goals.

Evaluation can work equally well in the context of classroom activities, with teachers asking learners on completion of a task to evaluate their own performance and to suggest ways in which they could improve in the future. This is particularly useful if learners have the chance to re-do the task. By taking the time to introduce this element to a classroom task, learners can be more confident of their ability to do so during more self-directed learning. By breaking down self-directed learning skills into this four-step framework, it is hoped that the process of becoming more self-directed will be more manageable for both students who wish to move in this direction and teachers who wish to help students do so. The clear framework can also aid teachers wishing to assess this aspect of their learners’ development, as each of the four stages can be clearly evidenced through such aids as learning plans, reflective diaries and learning logs.

There are a number of issues which may represent a challenge to teachers or institutions aiming to help learners to become more self-directed. Teachers may not feel they have the class time to devote to helping learners organize their learning or may lack confidence in their ability to do so. However, many of the techniques introduced in this paper can be incorporated into existing classroom tasks, and may simply involve including short discussions where students can reflect on and share their ideas and experiences of learning. As previously stated, psychological resistance to autonomy must be addressed, and learners must see the advantages of planning and monitoring their own learning if they are to fully engage in the process. Some learners may choose to reject self-directed learning altogether; however, it is hoped that by introducing certain elements of self-directed learning into classroom activities, those learners who are motivated to learn outside the classroom will do so more effectively.

While each of the four phases introduced in this paper are very important for effective self-directed learning, learners need help if they are to succeed in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning. By explicitly

introducing these aspects of the learning process to learners, and providing opportunities for learners to experiment with them, teachers can play an important role in supporting learners engaging in self-directed learning and developing autonomy as language learners.

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