

Motivational Strategies in the language classroom

- Learners work towards a *single team product* (e.g. joint performance).
 - In addition to individual grades, some sort of *team score* is also calculated, and it is used to modify the individual scores (e.g. when a team has prepared together for a test which the students take individually, the individual test marks will be modified by taking into account the team's average score).
 - Specific *roles* are assigned to every team member so that everybody has a specific responsibility (e.g. 'explainer', 'summariser' or 'note-taker').
 - *Resources* are either limited so that they need to be shared (e.g. one answer sheet per team) or they are such that they need to be fitted together (e.g. everybody receives a different section of an article).
 - Certain *class rules* are set that emphasise team responsibility (e.g. no one can proceed to some new material before everybody else in the team has completed the previous assignment).
- 3 Learners should be given some advance *training of group skills* (e.g. listening to each other; giving reasons in arguments; organising and coordinating the team's work) and they should be asked to reflect from time to time on how the cooperative work has gone and what could be improved.

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Increase student motivation by promoting cooperation among the learners.

More specifically:

- Set up tasks in which teams of learners are asked to work together towards the same goal.
- Take into account team products and not just individual products in your assessment.
- Provide students with some 'social training' to learn how best to work in a team.

4.7 Creating learner autonomy

'Autonomy' is currently a buzzword in educational psychology – it is also discussed under the label of 'self-regulation' – and during the past

decade several books and articles have been published on its significance in the L2 field as well (see Benson 2001, for a recent review). Allowing a touch of cynicism, I would say that part of the popularity of the concept amongst researchers is due to the fact that educational organisations in general have been rather resistant to the kind of changes that scholars would have liked to see implemented, and research has therefore increasingly turned to analysing how to prepare learners to succeed *in spite of* the education they receive. The other side of the coin is, of course, that the theoretical arguments in favour of learner autonomy are convincing and that there is some evidence that learners who are able to learn independently may gain greater proficiency – although as Barbara Sinclair (1999:100) warns us, ‘none of this evidence, in itself, is a strongly compelling argument for promoting autonomy in language learning’.

Why autonomy? A teacher's account . . .

‘In the mid 1970s I started for the first time to work with [Danish] pupils of 14–16 years in unstreamed language classes. I was up against the tired-of-school attitude that this age group often displays, as well as a general lack of interest in English as a school subject. In order to survive I felt I had to change my usual teacher role. I tried to involve the pupils – or rather I forced them to be involved – in the decisions concerning, for example, the choice of classroom activities and learning materials. I soon realised that giving the learners a share of responsibility for planning and conducting teaching-learning activities caused them to be actively involved and led to better learning. It also increased their capacity to evaluate the learning process. In this way a virtuous circle was created: awareness of how to learn facilitates and influences what is being learned and gives an improved insight into how to learn.’

(Leni Dam 1995:2)

The relevance of autonomy to motivation in psychology has been best highlighted by the influential ‘self-determination theory’ (cf. Section 1.1), according to which the freedom to choose and to have choices, rather than being forced or coerced to behave according to someone else’s desire, is a prerequisite to motivation. Autonomy is also related to group dynamics (cf. Section 2.3) in that the group’s internal development and growing maturity go hand in hand with the members taking on increasing responsibility and control over their own functioning. From the point of group dynamics, involved students are increasingly autonomous students.

Interesting research . . .

Noels, Clément and Pelletier (1999) conducted a pioneering study in which they examined the motivational impact of the language teacher's communicative style. They were particularly interested in the extent to which the language teacher was perceived by the students to support their autonomy and to provide useful feedback about the learning process. The researchers found that the degree of the teachers' support of student autonomy and the amount of informative feedback they provided were in a direct positive relationship with the students' sense of self-determination (autonomy) and enjoyment, which is exactly what theoretical considerations regarding learner autonomy would suggest. Interestingly, this directive influence did not reach significance with students who pursued learning primarily for extrinsic (instrumental) reasons, which indicates that those who study a language because they have to are not as autonomy-conscious as those who do it of their own free will.

What are the main ingredients of an autonomy-supporting teaching practice? Without being comprehensive (because this is a huge topic itself with tens of thousands of printed pages devoted to it in the literature), I have found the following points crucial:

- 1 *Increased learner involvement in organising the learning process:*
The key issue in increasing learner involvement is to share responsibility with the learners about their learning process. They need to feel that they are – at least partly – in control of what is happening to them. You can do a number of things to achieve this:
 - Allow learners *choices* about as many aspects of the learning process as possible, for example about activities, teaching materials, topics, assignments, due dates, the format and the pace of their learning, the arrangement of the furniture, or the peers they want to work with. Choice is the essence of responsibility as it permits learners to see that they are in charge of the learning experience. The difficult thing about such choices from our perspective is, however, that in order to make students feel that they are really in control, these choices need to be genuine, allowing for the fact that students may make the *wrong* decision. The only way to prevent this is to 'nurture' our students' ability to make choices by gradually expanding their opportunities for real decisions, first asking them to choose between given options from a menu, then to make modifications and changes, and finally to select goals and procedures completely on their own.

- Give students positions of *genuine authority*. Designating course responsibilities makes students fully functioning members of the class group. In traditional school settings such responsibilities are not clearly separated because the teacher takes care of all of them. However, there is no reason why many of the teacher's administrative and management functions can't be turned into student or committee responsibilities. The various leadership roles, committee memberships, and other privileges can then be rotated to give everyone a chance.
- Encourage *student contributions and peer teaching*. In my experience learners are very resourceful about finding ways to convey new material to their peers, if only to show that they can do a better job than the teacher! Some of my best seminar classes at university level have been the ones where I assigned complete sets of material to small student teams (usually a pair of students) and left it to their own devices how they went about teaching it to the others. I remember a class when the game '*Call my bluff*' was used to learn about language testing or when a huge board game was created to teach taxonomies of learning strategies.
- Encourage *project work*. When students are given complete projects to carry out, they will function in an autonomous way by definition: the teacher is not part of the immediate communication network and students are required to organise themselves, to decide on the most appropriate course of action to achieve the goal, and to devise the way in which they report their findings back to the class.
- When appropriate, allow learners to use *self-assessment* procedures (cf. Ekbatani and Pierson 2000). Self-assessment raises the learners' awareness about the mistakes and successes of their own learning, and gives them a concrete sense of participation in the learning process (for an example of a self-assessment instrument, see Table 9 in Section 5.4). I realise, of course, that in most school contexts self-assessment may not be sufficient and students are also to be assessed by you, the teacher – in such cases they may perhaps be involved in deciding *when* and *how* to be evaluated.

Well said . . .

'For a teacher to commit himself to learner autonomy requires a lot of nerve, not least because it requires him to abandon any lingering notion that he can somehow guarantee the success of his learners by his own effort.'

(David Little 1991:45)

- 2 *A change in the teacher's role:* In order to allow increased learner independence, there is a need to adopt a somewhat non-traditional teaching style, often described as the '*facilitating style*'. The teacher as a facilitator does not 'teach' in the traditional sense – that is, does not consider the students empty vessels that need to be filled with words of wisdom coming entirely from the teacher and the course-book – but views him/herself as a helper and instructional designer who leads learners to discover and create their own meanings about the world. In *The Facilitator's Handbook* (a book from which I have learnt a lot) Heron (1989) argues convincingly that – contrary to beliefs – a good facilitator is not characterised by a 'soft touch' or a 'free for all' mentality. He distinguishes three different *modes* of facilitation:
- *hierarchical*;
 - *cooperative*;
 - *autonomous*.

In the *hierarchical mode* facilitators exercise their power to direct the learning process *for* the group, taking full responsibility and making all the major decisions. The *cooperative mode* entails the facilitator's sharing the power and responsibilities *with* the group, prompting members to be more self-directing in the various forms of learning. In the *autonomous mode* the facilitator respects the total autonomy of the group in finding their own way and exercising their own judgement. The art of effective facilitation, according to Heron, lies in finding the right balancing and sequencing of the three modes.

Well said . . .

'Facilitation is a rigorous practice since more is at stake. It pays attention to a broader spectrum of human moves than does either Lecturing or Teaching. The move from Lecturer to Teacher to Facilitator is characterised by a progressive reduction in the psychological distance between teacher and student, and by an attempt to take more account of the learner's own agenda, even to be guided by it. Control becomes more decentralised, democratic, even autonomous, and what the Facilitator saves on controlling is spent fostering communication, curiosity, insight and relationship in the group.'

(Adrian Underhill 1999:140)

In a recent summary of learner autonomy in language education, Benson (2001) offers a clear taxonomy to summarise the variety of approaches that can be applied. He distinguishes five different types of practice to foster autonomy:

- *Resource-based approaches*, which emphasise independent interaction with learning materials (e.g. individualised learning or peer teaching).
- *Technology-based approaches*, which emphasise independent interaction with educational technologies (e.g. computers).
- *Learner-based approaches*, which emphasise the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner (e.g. various forms of strategy training – cf. Section 4.4).
- *Classroom-based approaches*, which emphasise changes in the relationship between learners and teachers in the classroom and learner control over the planning and evaluation of learning.
- *Curriculum-based approaches*, which extend the idea of control over the planning and evaluation of learning to the curriculum as a whole.

This list demonstrates well that if a teacher decides to adopt a more autonomy-supporting role, there is a wide range of approaches he/she can adopt to realise this goal.

Of course, the raising of learner autonomy is not always pure joy and fun. It involves *risks*. Some conflicts among the students or between you and the students may – and almost inevitably will – develop. In the field of group dynamics this is usually labelled the ‘storming stage’ of group development and it is generally believed that groups need to go through such a ‘cracking of the façades’ in order to achieve real maturity. It is at times like this that we teachers may panic, believe everything was a mistake, blame ourselves for our ‘leniency’, feel angry and resentful towards the students for not understanding the wonderful opportunity they have been offered, and thus resort to traditional authoritarian methods and procedures to ‘get order’. The forewarned teacher, however, will realise that some conflicts are a natural part of the autonomous learning process, gird up their loins, and mediate and negotiate the group through the storm (Dörnyei and Malderez 1997).

Problems you may encounter . . .

- It might be difficult to bring learners to make decisions and accept responsibility for these decisions.
- It might be difficult to respect the students’ right to make ‘wrong’ decisions.

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- It may not be easy to introduce group work among pupils who have never worked in groups before.
 - You may not find enough ready-made activities in the course-book that are suitable for autonomous learning and have to spend some time designing new ones.
 - It may be difficult for you to realise that you can't be everywhere at the same time.
 - It may be (and in fact it is) scary to relinquish the traditional means of classroom control and rely on new or modified methods of discipline.
 - In general, it might be difficult for you to 'let go' and trust the pupils' abilities to 'take hold'.
- (partly based on Dam 1995)

Although I am a believer in learner autonomy, I think it is useful to conclude this section with Good and Brophy's (1994:228) word of caution:

For one thing, the simplest way to ensure that people value what they are doing is to maximise their free choice and autonomy – let them decide what to do and when and how to do it. However, schools are not recreational settings designed primarily to provide entertainment; they are educational settings that students are required to come to for instruction in a prescribed curriculum. Some opportunities exist for teachers to take advantage of existing motivation by allowing students to select activities according to their own interests, but most of the time teachers must require students to engage in activities that they would not have selected on their own.

Strategy 29

Increase student motivation by actively promoting learner autonomy.

More specifically:

- Allow learners real choices about as many aspects of the learning process as possible.
- Hand over as much as you can of the various leadership/teaching roles and functions to the learners.
- Adopt the role of a facilitator.