

Setting the stage for autonomy in self-assessment

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Developing Autonomy through Self-Assessment

There are several definitions of autonomy, but as used in this paper autonomy refers to the control one has, to varying degrees, over one's own learning. It is thus the narrow view of learner autonomy, learning to learn effectively, that is looked at, not the broader view of learning to liberate (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). There are five main characteristics of autonomous learners (Dickinson, 1993). They can:

- identify what has been taught
- formulate their own learning objectives
- select and implement learning strategies
- monitor and identify strategies that do not work well for them
- self-assess their own learning.

This paper will focus on the latter aspect, namely, developing a degree of autonomy through self-assessment.

Who Assesses in Your Classroom?

Learners traditionally have played a minor role in assessing their proficiency in learning a language. As with so many other aspects of learning, it is the teacher who makes nearly all the choices and decisions. Teachers, when asked the question, 'Who makes decisions in your classroom?' are usually hard-pressed to give an instance where 'My learners' is the answer. And this is particularly true regarding assessment, especially when one thinks of

summative assessment, which focuses on product and results, rather than formative assessment, which aims to assess the process of learning that leads to a certain product or result. Teachers find it difficult to imagine learners assessing their progress at the end of a term and express concern at the reliability of summative self-assessments, particularly when those assessments involve marks that are recorded and used as a basis for promotion to higher levels. As for formative assessments, the value of engaging in the process of self-assessment appears to override the reliability of learners' assessment (Benson, 2001). Yet teachers still remain reluctant to involve learners in such an undertaking, perhaps not seeing its value in promoting learner autonomy.

The introduction of competency-based education in Algeria, with its focus on skills development rather than simply the acquisition of knowledge, has led textbook writers to think carefully about how best to assist learners in developing the ability to assess their own learning. At the end of each unit in *At the Crossroads*, the first-year secondary school textbook of English, for example, a section entitled, 'Check Your Progress', has been included, in which learners make decisions about how well they feel they can fulfil the language learning outcomes developed in each unit.

Creating the Conditions for Self-Assessment

In principle, the inclusion of such a self-assessment activity should promote the development of learner autonomy in the area of self-assessment. In practice, however, teachers report that many pupils complete the activity indicating that they have achieved all of the outcomes to a high degree, rather than fairly well or just a little, even though test results reveal otherwise. The problem is not with the activity itself. Instead, the environment may not be ideal for such an activity to be utilised effectively. An analogy can be made to the sowing of seed. No matter how good the seed may be, if it falls on stony ground, it will not germinate and grow. If the teacher has not created a classroom environment that accepts errors and weaknesses as learning points, then learners remain fearful of admitting them, either to themselves or to the teacher. A self-assessment activity carried out in such circumstances, then, is doomed to failure.

One has only to look at student copybooks to determine how errors are dealt with in many classrooms. Errors tend to be conspicuous by their

absence. And the reason this is so can be illustrated as follows. Suppose that a class exercise has been assigned in which learners transform sentences from the present simple into the past simple tense. One of the sentences is *Nora goes to visit her friend after school*. Two learners, Aziz and Nassima, write in their exercise books, *Nora goed to visit her friend after school*. While going over the exercise in class, they hear the teacher say that *Nora went to visit her friend after school* is the correct answer. Aziz discreetly takes out his rubber and erases the word *goed*, replacing it with *went*. He has effaced all traces of the error. Nassima, on the other hand, handles the error in a different way. She draws a line through the word *goed* and writes *went* above it. She is not ashamed or embarrassed to have been wrong. In fact, she realises that she can learn from her errors. When it comes time to study for her exam, she can focus on the errors she made rather than revise all the sentences in her exercise book. Aziz, on the other hand, has little choice but to revise all his homework since his exercise book has been purged of errors and it seems that he has learned everything well. Learners in Algerian schools tend to be more like Aziz than Nassima. They are encouraged by teachers to keep their exercise book 'clean', which means, in effect, erasing errors and replacing them with correct forms.

The teacher can play a significant role in creating an environment where errors, if not celebrated as points of learning, are at least acknowledged without fear of reprisal. One way for teachers to create such an environment is to admit mistakes themselves in front of their learners. The teacher is seen as a role model. If learners notice that the teacher readily acknowledges mistakes when they occur, then they, too, may be more willing to admit their own. Many teachers do not feel comfortable doing this, however, believing that they will lose the respect of their learners. In this case, a change in attitude is required, both from the teacher and the learners, in order for errors to be viewed in a more favourable light. As Dickinson and Carver (1993) point out, learners need three types of preparation on the road to developing greater autonomy as language learners: methodological preparation to handle the complexities of language learning, psychological preparation to develop self-confidence in themselves as learners, and practice in self-direction, which means training learners to assume greater responsibility in making informed decisions about their learning. In this case, psychological preparation

can go a long way to promoting acceptance of errors and mistakes as places where learning can take place.

Creating a suitable learning environment, then, is only one prerequisite for self-assessment activities to succeed. As mentioned earlier, teachers traditionally have tended to control and manage assessment in the classroom. Learners have little experience in assuming responsibility for assessing themselves. As such, they lack practice in self-direction and need to be trained in determining how well they have learned something.

Practice in Self-Direction through the Use of Rubrics

In fact, any time that a teacher hands over responsibility for something that s/he would normally do, learners have to be trained how to assume that responsibility. One way to achieve this training is through a rubric or grid that lists criteria and describes or defines the quality of each one. Learners see what the criteria are that constitute a successful performance, prepare themselves through practice, and judge how well they did afterwards.

For example, teachers often ask learners to work in groups to do certain activities. Group work is, in effect, an instance of a teacher relinquishing some of his or her responsibilities to learners. The teacher cannot monitor what happens in those groups all the time. In order for the group work to be successful, then, learners must be trained to assume some of the responsibilities that the teacher would traditionally assume in a teacher-centred class. One learner takes on the role of a manager, ensuring that each group member has a chance to participate, keeping them on task, making sure they use the target language as much as possible. Another plays the role of the error corrector, participating in the activity, to be sure, but with the additional task of listening and noting down frequent errors. A third individual might be assigned the role of secretary, taking notes, while the fourth, acting as the group reporter, summarises the work the group has done and presents it in a clear and logical way to the rest of the class.

A rubric can be prepared for each of these roles to enable group members to learn what exactly each role entails and how to fulfil that role most effectively. An example of a rubric for the group reporter, for example, appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Group Reporter Rubric

GROUP REPORTER RUBRIC			
Criteria	Quality		
Do I get my audience's attention?	Everyone looks at me.	Some look at me, while others look out the window.	No one looks at me. What's wrong with me?
Do I look at my audience when speaking?	I make sure to look at everyone.	I look at everyone in front of me.	I look down at my notes all the time.
Do I speak so everyone can hear me?	Everyone can hear me.	Only those sitting close to me can hear.	I speak to myself.
Do I speak so everyone can understand me?	I speak slowly and clearly all the time.	I eat some of my words and have trouble pronouncing a few of them.	Everyone thinks I am speaking Chinese.
How do I report what my group does?	I summarise what my group does and make sure to include the key points.	I summarise a little, but I also give some unnecessary information.	I report every boring detail and see the students and teacher fall asleep.

Notice that the criteria are given in the form of questions in the present simple tense. This encourages learners to ask themselves these questions before they actually stand up and make their presentation. It serves as a reminder of what they need to do to be a successful group reporter. Then, after the presentation has been made, learners can refer to the rubric again, either for peer- or self-assessment purposes. Notice also that quality is indicated by descriptors, not by marks. This is done for two reasons: first, to emphasise to the learners that not everything they do needs a mark and second, to encourage them to assess their performance in a situation that is non-threatening. The attempt at humour in some of the descriptors also serves to reduce affective filters that hinder learning.

Learners as Teachers

This type of rubric, then, trains learners to assess their own performance. From the criteria, they know what makes a good reporter, can work to incorporate these criteria into their presentations, and are able to decide afterwards how effective they were in doing so. These same criteria, it may be noted, also contribute to making a good teacher. And that is no coincidence for, in fact, group reporters, standing before a class and presenting information, become teachers for a short time. They have to get the audience's attention,

Speak loudly and clearly, make themselves understood, and maintain interest, all things that teachers have to keep in mind when speaking to a class. And these factors are not as intuitive as they may seem. Most teachers can probably remember an instructor in their pre-service training urging them to do these very things in front of a class. If teacher trainees need to be made aware of these factors, then learners do as well. Training and practice become vital in any undertaking to develop greater autonomy in learners.

One of the main problems teachers encounter in group work activities is a direct result of relinquishing certain responsibilities to learners without providing the necessary training and support. They give the learners responsibility as reporters, managers, secretaries, and correctors without clarifying what these responsibilities entail. The group work activity does not function well and the teacher vows never to do such an activity again. However, if learners get guided training and practice in assuming responsibilities traditionally held by the teacher in a teacher-centred class, they are much more likely to work successfully in a group, where learner autonomy fills the gap left by the teacher as s/he is busy monitoring elsewhere. Rubrics such as the one above are an effective means of providing a framework for guided practice as learners take on new responsibilities and assume greater autonomy.

In addition to a rubric for group reporter, rubrics can also be devised as self-assessment training tools for the other roles assumed by members of a group, such as manager, error corrector, and secretary. In fact, rubrics can be designed for everything that can be assessed, from how well a group works together to how successful a persuasive essay is to the quality of project work. The possibilities are endless. And each rubric serves to guide the learners from dependence on the teacher as the sole assessor to a degree of autonomy through self-assessment that allows for the development of a lifelong skill that can be applied far beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has endeavoured to show how one aspect of learner autonomy, self-assessment, can be developed by creating the conditions that allow it to flourish and by giving learners guidance and practice in assuming some of the responsibilities traditionally held by teachers. The necessary conditions for self-assessment can be created if the teacher demonstrates to learners the value, not shame, inherent in errors and mistakes. Once affective filters have been lowered and learners feel comfortable

acknowledging their errors and perceiving them as places where learning can take place, teachers can then introduce rubrics, with their criteria and descriptions of quality, as a framework to guide learners on the road to greater autonomy in the area of self-assessment. Learners who have acquired the ability to evaluate their own work in the classroom have acquired a life skill that can help them to assess performance in everything from work to family affairs.

References

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