

# **Learner's Autonomy-Learners Can Do Themselves**

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## **Preface**



This summer in 2011, 18 English teachers from New Taipei City are selected to join the training program “Teacher Development” held in Cambridge, England. This two-week long training program is sponsored by British Council and mainly organized by the Bell Educational Trust (now trading as Bell International). Several

workshops and tailored courses were given to promote international understanding and intercultural exchange.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) training is now received more and more worldwide attention, especially in most Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Mainland China and Taiwan. Language teachers need to be very well prepared and equipped with professional knowledge in order to face the fast changing world. During the training, teachers from different countries shared valuable teaching ideas and learned from each other's experiences. Through interactions and dialogues among fellow teachers, positive attitudes and creative ways of thinking and teaching thus nourished and formed.

The following reflections and thoughts are made in the workshop ‘Learner's Autonomy-Learners can do themselves’, given by Nicola Perry, a full-experienced language teacher. With a constant gaze and a lot of effort, she shared with us tons of evidences and proofs that students can be fully engaged on task as long as they are given enough authority and able to make their own decisions.

The teacher development training is the chance of a life time. This great cross-cultural experience may be served as a power booster in our own future English teaching!

## Developing learner's autonomy

Before Nicola started her workshop, she asked everyone one key question: **‘What is your role as a teacher?’**

Immediately, we started to share our point of view and found that most of the time, we haven't really thought about this question before! Being a teacher, I view myself as a guide, who helps students find their ways of



learning and exploring the world. Frankly, not until 3 or 4 years ago did I realized the role I should've been playing in class; a teacher who gives support and sets up a framework. Moreover, an ideal teacher is to engage and motivate students, and to introduce every possible tool for effective learning. As a result, this mentality also affects a teacher's way of teaching.

Later on, another question followed, and this time we were asked to fill out a questionnaire (shown as follows). **‘How much opportunity do you have to decide what/how to teach your learners?’**

Teacher-centered approach	Where are you?	Learner-centered approach
I have all the information.	_____	The syllabus and what needs to be achieved are there for us to share.
It is my job to transmit knowledge to you.	_____	I am here to facilitate and assist your learning.
I am responsible for your learning.	_____	You are responsible for your learning.
As a professional, it is my job to make all the decisions.	_____	As an adult, I trust you want to learn and will take responsibility for it.

Adapted from Scharle & Szabo (2005), who adapted it from Brandes & Ginnes (1992)

A long discussion began. Most of us are able to choose the textbooks and select

whatever teaching materials we are going to use in a new school year; as long as we follow certain standards and indicators. Some teachers thought younger learners are not capable enough to decide what to learn, so they need more guidance and instructions than higher graders.

Ideally, learners are responsible for their own learning and make the best out of every chance to master what they've learned. However, teachers may have noticed some learners are more reluctant to join any activity than others. Therefore, a contrast between good learners and bad learners was brought into our discussion, and to our surprise, there is no culture barrier at all! We found bad learners share quite a few same characteristics.

Good Learners	Bad Learners
◎Reflect on their learning and make decisions about it.	◎Blame teachers or the course book for poor results.
◎Take responsibility for their learning and their progress.	◎Expect the teacher to be responsible for their learning and their progress.
◎Know why they are learning English and try to stay motivated.	◎May have little enthusiasm for learning English.
◎Know how to study effectively.	◎May think they know more than the teacher.
	◎May not know how to study effectively.

While good learners have very high motivation and always do their best in class, bad learners are losing their focus and disoriented.

So, if teachers are to facilitate students instead of giving direct answers, what can we do to help? What are the possible strategies? Here are some suggestions:

### 1. Classroom English

Give simple and clear instructions in English, and encourage students to ask questions if they have any. If students feel free to pop up questions, they have autonomy already!

## **2. Share information**

Give a brief introduction of the course books you are going to teach. If possible, design an activity to introduce the syllabus of the course books to entice the learners and arouse their interest. Sharing information about the teaching materials will also build the bond between the learners and the lessons.

## **3. Ask learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses**

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses your learning. In getting started, students need help in assessing their existing knowledge and competence. Then, in classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive feedback on their performance. ..., students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how they might assess themselves — Chickering & Gamson (1997).

Give questions to students and help them to think about their own 4-skills, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. If learners get to know themselves better, they will be more responsible to their own learning. Ask them what they are good at and what they are not. If they have a chance to improve themselves, what are the possible ways to do it? By asking these questions, learners have a further close look at who they are and what kind of learners they want to be. Be careful! These answers should be done privately.

## **4. Tell learners how you see it**

A mutual respect is built when teachers and learners view each other as partners of learning. Encourage learners by giving positive feedbacks, and always help them build self-confidence. Tell your students how you expect them to be more responsible learners and you believe they can do better and better!

## **5. Take yourself out of the picture**

Sometimes teachers need to step back a little bit just to get a clearer look. Teaching can be very exhausting and may drain away your energy and passion. The best teachers lose themselves in the subject being taught. Try to lose yourself in the moment and you'll be amazed by your students work!

## **6. Be consistent**

Once the teachers give learners autonomy; that is to say, enough power to be the masters of their own study, stay with it! Be consistent, otherwise, they will be confused and disorient again.

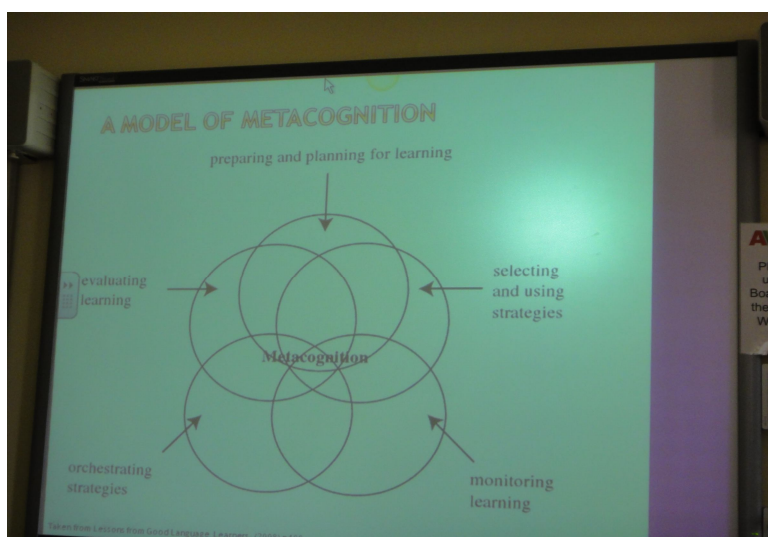
### Provide various learning strategies

There are various strategies teachers may want to introduce to students. Here are the main three:

1. **Cognitive strategies:** help learners process input, and transform and apply L2 knowledge.
2. **Affective strategies:** learners create positive attitudes and stay motivated.
3. **Sociocultural-interactive strategies:** help learners with communication, sociocultural contexts and identity.

However, there are still ‘**Metastrategies**’ that may help the learners become more effective. ‘Meta’ in Greek means ‘after’, and is a prefix used in English to indicate a concept which is an abstraction from another concept, used to complete or add to a latter. The word ‘metalanguage’ means ‘the language used to talk about language’, for example, the grammar terms. In English, where adjectives, adverbs, and possessive pronouns constitute an embedded metalanguage; and where nouns, verbs, and, in some instances, adjectives and adverbs, constitute an object language.

To help learners develop autonomy, ‘metacognition’ should be taken into consideration.



learning.

Metacognition can be defined simply as thinking about thinking (Anderson, 2002, 2005). Strong metacognitive skills empower language learners: when learners reflect upon their learning, they become better prepared to make conscious decisions about what they can do to improve their

Metacognition, in language learning, as the figure (A Model of Metacognition) shown above, can be divided into five primary and intersecting components:

- preparing and planning for learning
- selecting and using strategies
- monitoring learning
- orchestrating strategies
- evaluating learning

With these approaches, learners are able to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions.

### **A practical example**

Nicola also gave us an example applying metacognition to a listening task. There are certain teaching steps going on:

#### **1. Lead-in**

Teachers give a pre-listening introduction to topic, and relate students' prior knowledge to the task, e.g. discussion, looking at pictures, etc. This step is to engage learners and make them stay focused.

#### **2. Pre-task work(optional)**

Teachers lead students to look through the worksheet, work on vocabulary, prediction, etc. This step can lower the anxiety of learners and prepare them to do better.

#### **3. Select clear task**

Teachers need to select carefully the materials, which should be clear enough for learners to follow. Tell them to listen for keywords or sentences.

#### **4. Play recording or students read text**

Teachers *DO NOT* expect learners to understand everything.

#### **5. Feedback on task**

Teachers *DO NOT* ask unfair questions- you set a clear task- have they done it? *DO*

*NOT* throw in a whole pile of extra questions!

## **6. Reflection: Could they do the task?**

Teachers monitor and check students' outcomes. If they could do it, go to next task if there's any, or go to step 7.

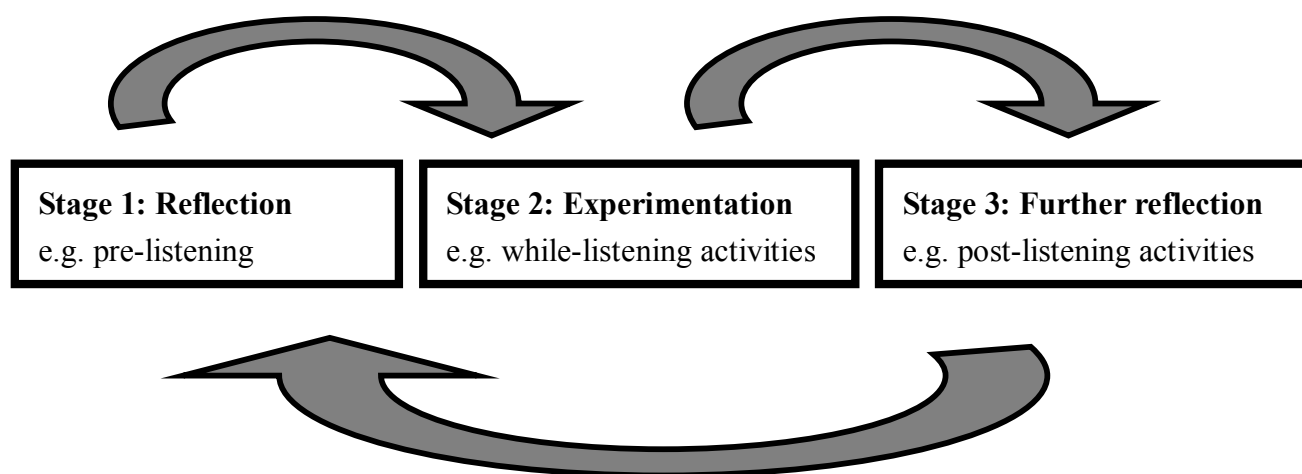
If they couldn't do the task, it tells the teacher that they need to read/listen/view again.

## **7. Conclude**

Teachers now tie up loose ends. Lead to follow-up activities, or review what has been learned, etc.

By following this circle, teachers not only conduct a complete teaching process, but also allow students to view more clearly how they've done. Teachers need to bear in mind that process is more important than product! And hopefully, students may notice how they progress!

### **The plan-do-review model**



Adapted from Ellis, 1999b

Teachers may not believe that learners are capable of expressing their point of views about how they learn, or understanding teachers' explanations about what they are going to do and why. However, with appropriate steps teachers still can set up a friendly and supportive climate for active learning, which is based on learners' need, interests and values. Learners are individuals, and teachers should take into account such differences between them.

Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Researchers report

that, regardless of the subject matter, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. Students who work in collaborative groups also appear more satisfied with their classes' (Cross cited these sources: Beckman, 1990; Chickering & Gamson, 1991)

## **Conclusion**

Active and positive learning attitudes can be fostered. We teachers in a way should constantly remind ourselves of learner-centered approach and monitor our own teaching process. Scaffold and support our students' learning with diverse activities and give instant feedbacks. Encourage them to study together and answer each other's questions instead of answering them ourselves. Be a model by asking questions and displaying good listening behaviors. And above all, try to make the tasks and assignments interesting. The more interesting, the more involved the students become.

'Most of us only know how to be taught, we haven't learned how to learn.' — Malcom Knowles

Teachers are learners, too. Put ourselves in our students' shoes and we'll get a closer view of their ways of thinking and doing things. Respect their multi-talents and use active teaching techniques. Encourage them to work in groups and cooperate with each other. Thus, someday the ultimate goal will be reached: learners can do themselves!