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Individualizing Learning through Self-Directed Projects

THE SHIFT IN EMPHASIS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING FROM A TEACHER-DIRECTED approach to a learner-centred one, along with the perceived need to promote learners' efforts at developing autonomy, have resulted in new challenges for the foreign language teacher. The extent to which increasing awareness of self-directed learning will result in gains in student proficiency in the short or long term, or will simply motivate students to become more autonomous in their learning, has not yet been demonstrated. However, encouraging language learners to become more involved in managing their own learning is an appealing notion for several reasons. One reason is that "learning is more effective when learners are active in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in the decisions which affect it." (Sheerin 1997:56). Particularly for mixed ability groups of students, the promotion of learner independence in language study can provide a means to meet the differing needs, expectations, and proficiency levels of individual learners that may not be met in a group-oriented classroom setting. Finally, the need for developing greater autonomy in language learning can be seen as one facet of lifelong learning, in which each individual effectively makes decisions about which learning path to take.

Nonetheless, language teachers may feel uneasy about encouraging and implementing practices aimed at developing learner independence in an academic setting, where student attention is largely focused on completing other programme requirements. They may also feel uncomfortable relinquishing their traditional roles as language experts, and as providers and directors of knowledge. They may have misgivings about the ability of learners to organize themselves to work productively and independently.

Self-directed projects at Arabian Gulf University

With both the advantages and possible pitfalls of promoting learner independence in mind, we decided to introduce a self-directed element in the required English courses we teach in the premedical programme at Arabian Gulf University in Manama, Bahrain. Our students vary widely in their experience with English, from those who have graduated from English medium schools to those whose only exposure has been a few weekly contact hours in government schools. The one-year premedical programme is very demanding on students' time and energies; English is only one of several courses that students must successfully complete before they are accepted to the medical phase. Any initiative to foster learner autonomy has to be flexible enough to fit our course and programme constraints, as well as provide for learner choice. One solution we have found effective is self-directed projects, which students contract to complete over the course of the semester.

This element of our programme was inspired by an article by Lee (1998) that describes her efforts to develop greater student autonomy in language learning by asking them to volunteer for a self-directed programme. Under the programme students drew up a contract with the instructor to work independently on different language-enhancing activities outside of class during the academic year (e.g., reading the newspaper or watching English language television). The type of activity undertaken as well as the amount of time to be expended on the activity were specified in the contract, which was then kept by the instructor until the end of the contract period. Students had the option of renegotiating the contract with the instructor at any time. While Lee (1998)

reports limited success in that only some of her more enthusiastic learners achieved their goals, we felt that contracts for a self-directed project fit our goals by offering flexibility, learner choice, and a chance to develop individual responsibility in language learning.

Our initiative differs most significantly from Lee's in not being voluntary. That is, all students of a certain proficiency level (intermediate and above) in our programme must complete a self-directed project each semester, and they are allotted a number of marks for its completion. We have found it helpful to be fairly specific about project options, as described below. We refer our current students to successfully completed projects from previous years, which are kept on file in our self-access centre to serve as examples. The guidelines we provide to the students have proved effective in helping them clarify what they want to do and what they can realistically complete within the time limits imposed.

Students are encouraged to choose a project that is interesting to them and that they feel will best meet their needs as learners of English. They are invited to devise their own projects, which the instructor must approve. However, many students opt for one of our suggested projects. Since we encourage students to choose a project that best meets their needs as English language learners, we present the ideas for projects mostly under skills labels, such as reading or writing, but in fact, all of the projects described below involve several skills. The reading/vocabulary project, for example, requires either oral discussions or written summaries. Projects do not have to be done by individual students, although that seems to be the most frequent choice. Some pairs or small groups of students have successfully completed projects. Many projects reflect the students' interest in their future medical studies, though just as many aim at general English improvement.

Examples of self-directed projects

The range of possible projects is quite broad, and many of the student-developed topics are unique. For example, one student made several visits to a local home for the elderly and wrote reports about her conversations with some of the residents. One group of students prepared an orientation booklet for

new students at the university that included articles about various required courses, descriptions of student housing, advice on avoiding problems, and entertainment suggestions. Another group compiled a directory of medical sites on the Internet. For each site, the group included the Internet address, sponsor, a summary of the kind of information available, and an evaluation of its usefulness to medical students. Several students have taped interviews with medical faculty members or other medical experts and then summarized what they said.

What follows is an explanation of different project topics, organized by language skill, that we suggest to students:

Reading/vocabulary

Students commit to read a certain number of pages in English and summarize what they have read in writing or in discussion with the instructor a specified number of times. They must also keep a vocabulary notebook in which they enter all the words they felt they had to look up, together with their meanings in context and any collocations they notice. This notebook must be presented to the instructor periodically during the semester. Students can choose to read anything they want, either one longer text or several shorter ones, from books, periodicals, or the Internet. The readings are decided upon and approved before the contract is completed.

Writing

Journal writing

For this project, the student writes about 400 words in a journal each week, allows the teacher to read and indicate errors at least every other week, and, finally, hands in a corrected version of the journal at the end of the semester. The students may write about anything they like in their journals; most write about their daily activities and their thoughts, feelings, and problems as the semester progresses, while some include poems or stories.

On-line newsletter

For this project, the student writes an article for publication in the on-line newsletter of the English Language Unit of the university. The student decides on a topic for the article in collaboration with the instructor, the newsletter editor, and other students who have chosen to write articles for the newsletter. All articles must be original, though they can be based on information gathered from other sources, for example, interviews, readings, or questionnaires. Rough drafts of articles are submitted to the instructor first, who indicates errors. The drafts must be corrected before the final, word-processed articles are submitted to the editor.

Speaking

Speaking contest

Students commit to enter the university speaking contest, which is held near the end of the academic year. They must decide on a topic, gather information, prepare a five- to eight-minute speech, and deliver it in front of their classmates before presenting it at the actual contest. Drafts of the speech are given to the instructor.

Debate club

Students must attend the weekly meetings of the debate club. They are expected to participate as part of a debate team several times during the semester, while at other meetings they listen to debates and join the follow-up discussions.

Audiocassette journal

For this project, the teacher records questions and ideas for discussion on an audiocassette. The questions tend to be open-ended and aim to elicit a 10- to 15-minute response. The students then record their responses (in private) and return the tape to the instructor, who responds to what they said, points out major language problems, if necessary, and records further questions. The process is repeated several times during the semester. The audio journal has proved very successful, especially with students who are shy about speaking out in class.

Play reading

This project requires a group of students, who meet with an English instructor one hour weekly (or biweekly, depending on scheduling) to practice reading a play. The plays are selected in consultation with the instructor, and after the practice period may be performed before a live audience of the performers' classmates or audio-recorded. This project can be especially useful for improving pronunciation, intonation, and stress, as well as vocabulary, especially use of colloquial expressions.

Vocabulary
Lexical Sets

Students collect a specified number of words relating to actions that can be demonstrated (e.g., movement of the legs: walk, stand, stomp, hobble, etc.). The list is presented to the instructor for verification, who later will test the student's understanding on the words by having the student perform the actions. If more than one student is involved, one can perform the action while the other supplies the lexical item.

Collocation notebook

The student uses concordance software to search articles on a specific topic (possibly related to medicine) for words and their collocations, which are then recorded in a vocabulary notebook.

Listening/dictation

Working individually, students try to write down the exact words spoken in 10 to 15 minutes of a video. They give the first draft of the script to the instructor, who indicates errors and helps if needed. Students then revise the script and meet with the instructor to discuss the meaning of what they have written. Finally, they prepare a typed copy of the script with gaps for certain words so that it can be used as a cloze listening activity in future classes. A similar project, writing the words to popular songs, has to be treated with caution because some students simply download the words from the Internet. We are not yet aware that the same is possible for film scripts.

Research survey

Two or more students can work on this project. After they decide on a topic and have it approved by the instructor, they gather information from a variety of English language sources through personal interviews and questionnaires. An oral or written report summarizing the information is then prepared. The report must include the following information:

- Introduction: Reasons for doing the survey, what they hoped to find out.
- Procedure: When, where, how, and from whom the data were collected.
- Results: Summary of data and information gathered from different sources as well as questionnaire results
- Discussion: Interpretation of the results.

One recent survey concerned attitudes towards English among students attending language schools in the community, another involved an investigation of students' sleeping habits.

Assigning the self-directed project

After the project assignment is discussed in class and students are provided with a handout containing some project ideas, they are invited to meet with their instructors within a period of two weeks to discuss their ideas and fill out the contract (see the appendix). Students may choose to find their own materials or use those available in our self-access centre (e.g., videos, books, periodicals, and the Internet). No special equipment or resources should have to be purchased because the materials chosen by the student are readily available in the instructional or community setting.

To prevent work on the project being put off to the last minute, the contract specifies that a certain amount of work must be completed by mid-semester. Some projects require a product to be handed in regularly (such as written or recorded journals), while others require a definite deadline (such as articles written for the on-line newsletter). The contract may be renegotiated during the first few weeks of the semester. All project work must be completed by the end of the week preceding final exams. Marks are awarded for successfully completing the project as specified in the contract.

Teacher support in self-directed projects

The projects described above are intended to be completed by the student outside of class, so what is the instructor's role? The more enthusiastic students in the study described by Lee (1998) mentioned teacher support as an important factor in the success of their self-directed learning. As Voller (1997) and others have stressed, the role of the teacher in promoting autonomous learning becomes that of a guide, organizer, facilitator, and resource person, rather than a dispenser of knowledge. In fact, without a good deal of support and follow-up from the instructor, it is unlikely that most of our students would be able to complete their projects as planned. Those students with little experience working independently will especially need guidance through the process.

Some students may feel confused or unmotivated by the shift of responsibility, so it is

helpful to provide a chance for them to give feedback in class on project topics and their progress. This feedback may be structured, for example, with a checklist for students to describe difficulties they had, benefits of the project, and whether they achieved what they hoped to. Often a short face-to-face meeting with the instructor will be sufficient to overcome any problems.

The amount of time invested by the instructor in following up on students' projects will vary, depending on the topics and specifications, but should not exceed one or two hours per student per semester. The most time-consuming aspects are probably the initial explaining and negotiating until a contract is agreed on, and the verbal and written reminders about deadlines, and meetings that may be needed throughout the semester.

Student response to the projects

We have found that those students who made a point of keeping in touch on a regular basis, through appointments, exchange of materials, and discussion of ideas or problems are the most successful in completing what they set out to do. Some are already quite used to working independently and have little difficulty setting up their own schedules and meeting deadlines. Others inevitably put things off, change their minds frequently, scale down their plans drastically, or are simply unwilling or unprepared to take advantage of the opportunity to work independently. Nevertheless, in the three years during which self-directed projects have been a part of our English programme, the majority have been carried out as planned.

Results of a recent questionnaire revealed that most students (72 percent) agreed that the project work had helped them improve their English, although fewer (35 percent) believed the projects should be compulsory. Nonetheless, we feel that awarding marks for achieving a goal, not only for the quality of the final product, acts as a motivating factor. Without this stimulus, it is unlikely that even the most enthusiastic of our students would succeed in completing their project because of the heavy demands on their out-of-class time and energy.

Conclusion

We believe that self-directed projects can be easily integrated into any teaching situation because topics and specifications can change to fit the students' ages, interests, backgrounds, and proficiency levels. Those projects we have described are only examples, and many other ideas commensurate with the needs and abilities of students will suggest themselves to instructors in other settings.

No matter how rich the classroom input or how stimulating the activities therein, most students are unlikely to learn everything they need to succeed in a class that meets for only a limited number of hours weekly. We have to provide more opportunities for using and interacting in English, and we must respect our students' rights and interests as individuals to exercise choice in their foreign language study. Involving students in doing self-directed projects is just one way we may help them gain confidence in their ability to manage their own learning and move further along the road to becoming independent language learners.

References

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ENGLISH SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING PROGRAMME
Project Contract

This is an agreement between

_____ (name of student)

and

_____ (name of teacher)
in regard to the self-directed learning programme project for English.

I agree to complete the following project under the conditions described below [Copy the description of a project from the description of project ideas, or if you have another idea for a project, write below the description and conditions that you and your teacher have agreed upon].

I will complete the following part of the project on or before _____ [a date at approximately the midpoint of the term]. The entire project must be complete on or before _____ [a date a week or so before the end of the term].

I have chosen this project because I think it will help me to improve my English skills in the following ways:

I understand that my mark for this project will partially depend on my fulfilling this agreement.

AGREED: Signed

_____ (name of student)

and

_____ (name of teacher)

Date: _____