

# I Raise My Voice: Promoting Self-Authoring through a Curriculum-Based Project

**L**earners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) bring an array of backgrounds, identities, and experiences to the classroom. One goal that we as teachers have is to connect with our learners and provide them a space where their voices are heard and acknowledged. We can do that by creating opportunities in our lessons through curriculum development, materials selection, and lesson planning. Within this space, learners can share and learn from one another and develop their language abilities. Through exposure to other views, learners can reflect on their own place in their world and engage in *self-authoring*—a term coined by Hernandez-Zamora (2010) that refers to critical-thinking skills development and acquisition of language resources to take charge of one's life.

For example, in Afghanistan, where women find limited access to education, the introduction through online resources to alternative discourses regarding gender norms in other countries helps a number of women think about their place in Afghan society and their desire for change (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit 2013; Manganaro and Alozie 2011).

In this article, I describe a study on the use of a self-designed ESL online curriculum to cultivate self-authoring within the context of an EFL online class with a female student in Afghanistan. A computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool called VoiceThread was used for this project; however, due to Internet connectivity issues, it played a secondary role. While this study centered on a teaching context in Afghanistan, the themes and content explored

are applicable to any classroom context and can be adapted to other language levels and classroom settings. In effect, the primary goal of this curriculum is to help learners gain an awareness of their place in the world and play a more active role in their learning process.

I draw from a body of literature that examines self-authoring and the role of a curriculum in developing it. I describe the teaching context in which I conducted the study, then give an overview of the unit plan and a description of the lessons I used. I also provide teaching suggestions for use in other contexts. I finally discuss implications based on the results of this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Developing critical-thinking skills and having the linguistic resources necessary to free

oneself from the burden of sociohistorical circumstances, being able to speak for oneself, and being cognizant of one's place in the world represent the means by which one becomes a self-author (Hernandez-Zamora 2010). To this end, *intellectual sponsors*, or what Vygotsky (1978, 63) termed "more capable others" (e.g., teachers), play a crucial role in engaging learners in a critical dialogue on their current reality and ways of changing their reality, encouraging them to have greater agency over their lives (Freire 2001; Hernandez-Zamora 2010).

Promoting self-authoring among learners requires a curriculum that derives from learners' own experiences, gives them some control over their learning, and allows them to share their thoughts on topics of interest. Weinstein's (1999) *Learners' Lives as Curriculum* framework serves as a model. The goal of implementing this type of curriculum is twofold: to achieve authenticity and to encourage active participation of students in the development of materials and linguistic and thematic content. Instead of the teacher being the sole decision maker, learners have a stake in selecting themes for the curriculum. They shift to the roles of facilitator and input generator, who have some claim over the content of their lessons and linguistic focus and share responsibility for their learning (Deeb and Weinstein 2011).

In this particular instance, lessons start with a theme that resonates with the learners, followed by a focus on a specific language point and investigation of a problem and possible solution (Deeb and Weinstein 2011). This brings the notion of collaboration in the curriculum to the fore, where teachers are attuned to learners' needs and engaged with them in dialogue. Learners convert into "experts" who can relay information about their life experiences. In essence, this framework merges the *transmission model* (i.e., the transmission of information about English) with a *constructivist approach*, which refers to the building of learners' knowledge through exploration of an issue and creation of a product (Deeb and Weinstein 2011). Learners

monitor their progress closely and notice the process.

Designing and implementing a curriculum that facilitates learners' active participation and contributions paves the way for community building and self-authoring development within the classroom.

## THE PROJECT

This section provides an overview of the teaching environment and type of learner in this study, which was a one-on-one online English class that I taught to a female student named Mahida (the student's name has been changed) using Skype, under the auspices of a United States-based nonprofit organization called Alliance for International Women's Rights (AIWR) (2016). AIWR's mission is to support women's rights and promote female empowerment through English language learning in areas where women's access to education is limited. AIWR partners with the Kandahar Institute for Modern Studies (KIMS) (2016), a vocational training center located in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to offer English classes online to male and female learners at this center. At the time of the study, Mahida had been studying English for about two years, and her level of English was pre-intermediate. Her goals were to improve her speaking and listening skills in order to be able to communicate more fluently in English and study abroad in the future.

Mahida is part of a group of learners who were selected to study through AIWR and KIMS's joint online English program. The other learners in the program are university students, homemakers, or young professionals. Their level of English ranges from pre-intermediate to upper intermediate. Volunteer English teachers from all over the world teach the 50-minute classes twice a week via Skype. Classes last for three months with a possibility of extension. Learners access their lessons online by going to a computer room at KIMS, where they are assigned a specific computer and given a headset. Because of low bandwidth, learners

and teachers are advised not to use a webcam to communicate. They therefore have to resort to the chatbox or the microphone.

After teachers submit their availabilities, the AIWR volunteer coordinator matches them with learners and sends an introductory email with a short profile of the learner. This email includes guidelines about the learner’s initial language assessment and instructions for completing a monthly report on the student’s skills and the topics discussed. There is also information about completing a three-month report detailing the student’s progress in all four skills and a summary of the topics.

The following sections present the content of the curriculum, the structure of my lessons, and additional teaching suggestions.

## ONLINE CURRICULUM CONTENT

My goal for the ESL online curriculum was to incorporate topics that could shore up self-authoring and provide an opportunity for learners to share and record their opinions. I drew from Weinstein and Cloud’s (2007) curriculum called “Lives Unfolding,” which focuses on learners’ identities as a means of exploring their place in the world and developing agency. Based on this format, I started with two units to assess Mahida’s response, which would give me feedback on ways to improve the curriculum in regard to her language level and the relevance of the topics to her life (see Table 1). The curriculum is designed for learners at the pre-intermediate level but can be adapted to any classroom context.

<b>Unit 1: Identity</b>	
<b>1. Meaning of the Name</b>	Discuss the meaning of one’s name to foster reflection about one’s place in the world
<b>2. Who am I?</b>	Focus on parts of speech (e.g., adjectives) to describe oneself in relation to one’s environment
<b>3. Community</b>	Discuss the meaning of “community” and common activities within the learner’s community; focus on the use of present simple tense and adverbs of frequency; analyze what a community is and the ways it can shape one’s worldview, beliefs, and values
<b>4. A Mentor</b>	Identify a person who has had an influential role in the learner’s life; use past tenses to narrate a time in the learner’s life when a mentor or intellectual sponsor impacted his or her life
<b>Unit 2: Happiness</b>	
<b>1. What Makes Me Happy?</b>	Use a fixed phrase (“_____ makes me happy”) and a poem (“What Makes Me Happy”) to elicit aspects in the learner’s life that make him or her happy
<b>2. Staying Healthy</b>	Promote happiness to engage the mind and body through kinesthetic movement—that is, basic physical exercises—and basic instructions in the imperative mood
<b>3. My Happiness Plan</b>	Create goals in the form of a plan, using the future form “be going to”; stay happy and consider ways of spreading happiness in the learner’s community

**Table 1. Structure of two units** (adapted from Weinstein and Cloud 2007)

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CURRICULUM AND TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

### Unit 1: Identity

The topic of identity helps learners explore their background and relationship to the world. Through the process of identification, and the discovery of and reflection on their multiple identities, learners begin to embrace who they are as human beings and acknowledge particular individuals from their communities who have had an impact on their lives and their worldview.

### Meaning of the Name

The first lesson centers on the meaning of learners' names as a way of underscoring their uniqueness and their cultural heritage. I introduced the topic of names by having Mahida share examples of common names in Afghanistan and their meanings. Additionally, I asked for traditions related to name selection before having her listen to a recording (through VoiceThread) on the origins of my own name, naming traditions in my culture, and the reasons that I like my name. After discussing the content of the text and answering comprehension questions, Mahida used the format of my text to record herself talking about her name.

**Teaching suggestions.** In pairs, learners interview each other about their respective names and the names' meanings, and each learner reports to the class about his or her partner's name. This activity provides opportunities for community building and interaction. As a follow-up, learners make a poster with the names of all their classmates and the meanings of those names. Another idea, for homework, is to have learners ask their family members about the origins of their names and naming traditions in their families or communities. Afterward, they can either report to their classmates in small groups or give a presentation about what they learned.

### Who am I?

The next lesson focuses on the topic of identity to encourage learners to consider their place in the world. I had Mahida look at a picture

of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani advocate for women's rights and education, and describe five things about her (she is a woman; she is Pakistani; etc.). Mahida then listened to a recording, again through VoiceThread, of a poem I wrote entitled "Who am I?" (see Figure 1). I had her notice my use of personality adjectives and the pronoun "I" to describe myself. Finally, I asked her to create her own poem, starting each verse with "I am \_\_\_\_\_."

### Who am I?

I am French-American.  
I am a woman.  
I am a teacher.  
I am Jewish.  
I am a daughter and a sister and a niece.  
I am reliable.  
I am compassionate.  
I am an elephant that stands tall and strong.  
I am me.

Figure 1. The poem "Who am I?" by Lea Gabay

**Teaching suggestions.** Learners complete the poem with just adjectives or noun phrases, according to a certain category (e.g., family members, nationalities, animals). The class brainstorms personality adjectives, with learners offering examples and choosing those that correspond to their own personality. When learners have finished writing their poems, teachers ask them if they want to share their poem with the class; if feasible, teachers can record learners' poems via a recording device or VoiceThread. As a supplementary activity for vocabulary building, learners create mini-dictionaries with the personality adjectives, including definitions, their own sentences, and word families.

### Community

In the next lesson, there is a transition from the self to learners' communities. My goal was to shine light on the impact that a community has on learners' values, attitudes, and beliefs, and the way in which community shapes

their worldview. As a schema-building task, I showed Mahida pictures of people engaging in different activities and asked questions: What do you see in this picture? What are the people doing? How do they feel?

Afterward, we discussed the meaning of “community,” various kinds of communities, and activities that members of different communities do on a regular basis. After having Mahida listen to my recording of a description of my own community, I reviewed the use of adverbs of frequency and the present simple tense. In the final part of the lesson, Mahida chose a particular community and gave a description of it and its routines.

**Teaching suggestions.** Teachers design a homework task in which learners conduct mini-interviews in a specific community to which they belong. To begin, they might make a list of the various communities to which they belong (e.g., home communities, school communities, work communities, communities related to activities). Learners select a community, then create questions in class or at home on this community’s routines. Creating and asking these questions enable learners to practice the use of adverbs of frequency and the present simple tense. Once the interviews are complete, learners write a report on what they learned and share their findings in groups or give a presentation.

#### **A Mentor**

The unit concludes with a topic about a specific person or intellectual sponsor (i.e., a mentor) who has been influential in the learner’s life and has impacted the learner’s views of himself or herself and the world. As a lead-in to the topic, I showed Mahida pictures of a mentor or teacher helping someone and asked her to describe what she saw and how the people in the pictures might feel. I subsequently told her a story about a teacher who inspired me. After talking about the content of the story, answering comprehension questions, and focusing on the use of past tenses (particularly past simple), Mahida told me about a teacher who had played a significant role in her life.

**Teaching suggestions.** Learners talk in small groups about an influential mentor or teacher, or learners give a presentation to the class. Either way, learners can include the following elements:

- Who the mentor or teacher is
- How they know him or her
- What they like about him or her (students can use personality adjectives, as in “I like her because she is reliable”)
- When and how he or she helped them

Another suggestion is to have learners write letters to their mentor or teacher telling how that person inspired them. An option is for learners to make a recording addressed to the mentor or teacher.

#### **Unit 2: Happiness**

Happiness is a topic that can promote positive thinking and feelings of self-worth. When learners are given an opportunity to think about moments of happiness, they are more receptive to hearing from and interacting with other perspectives, which in turn facilitates the emergence of self-authoring.

#### **What Makes Me Happy?**

The first lesson addresses aspects in learners’ lives that make them happy and their sources of happiness and hopes for a better world. As a lead-in, Mahida looked at pictures that evoke happy feelings (e.g., smiling faces, bright colors, pleasing landscapes), described them, and expressed her reactions to them.

Next, Mahida made predictions about the content of a poem entitled “What Makes Me Happy” (see Figure 2) with the help of key words. In the following stage, I read the poem, and she gave her opinion of it. Afterward, Mahida had to remember word chunks from the poem by putting some of its sentences in order. We then focused on the use of the fixed phrase “\_\_\_\_\_ makes me happy”; I had her tell me examples of things that made her happy. As a final step, she wrote her own version of the poem, according to the model and with the help of the fixed phrase.

### What Makes Me Happy

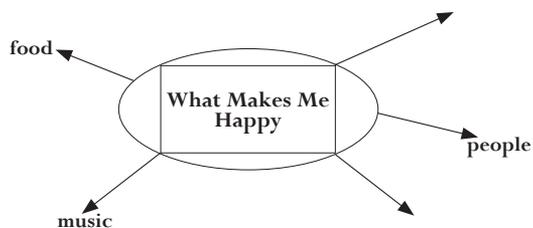
So many beautiful things in the world  
make me happy.  
A star in the sky makes me happy.  
Rain makes me happy.  
A smile from a friend makes me happy.  
My favorite book makes me happy.  
New words make me happy.  
The sun on my face makes me happy.  
My grandmother's warm hands make me  
happy.  
Chocolate cake makes me happy.  
My family makes me happy.  
This is my happiness.

**Figure 2. The poem "What Makes Me Happy" by Lea Gabay**

**Teaching suggestions.** As an alternative lead-in, teachers can write the word *happiness* on the board and elicit feedback from learners about what that word means to them. As a word-chunk retrieval activity, teachers can write the poem "What Makes Me Happy" on the board, have learners read it a few times, and then erase certain words, prompting learners to recall them. Finally, when preparing learners to write their own poem, teachers can introduce them to a mind map and have them brainstorm words that they associate with happiness (see Figure 3).

### Staying Healthy

The objective of this lesson is to activate self-authoring development and a state of well-being by integrating activities that engage mind and body through kinesthetic movement (i.e., basic physical exercises),



**Figure 3. Mind map for "What Makes Me Happy"**

with instructions and commands in the imperative mood. As a schema-building activity, Mahida explained the meaning of the expression "stay healthy" and shared her exercising habits and ways of staying healthy. Before listening to my recording of a poem I wrote entitled "Get Ready to Move!" (see Figure 4), I clarified the meaning of certain vocabulary words. I then had Mahida share examples of general action verbs and action verbs related to health, and she gave a definition of the word *instruction*. After she had listened to my instructions and answered comprehension questions, we looked at the form and function of the imperative mood. Finally, Mahida created her own instructions.

### Get Ready to Move!

Get ready to move!  
Stand up  
Put your hands on your head  
Put your hands down  
Bend your left knee  
Stand straight  
Take your right leg and stretch it behind  
your back  
Put your leg back  
Put your hands up and jump  
Put your hands down  
Sit down and put your hands behind your  
back  
Stand up  
Hop five times  
Run around in a circle three times and  
stop  
Stop and jump one more time and say:  
"Yeah!"

**Figure 4. The poem "Get Ready to Move!" by Lea Gabay**

**Teaching suggestions.** In large classrooms, learners can be placed in groups of no more than six, and each member of the group reads his or her instructions to the others who perform the movements being described. Teachers can also select learners to give

their instructions to the whole class and have everyone participate in the activity. If feasible, learners can be involved in a “Stay Healthy” campaign in their school and make videos of themselves giving instructions and sharing them with other classes. If access to technology is limited, learners could be invited to other classes as guest speakers to give examples of healthy life habits and lead an activity on giving instructions.

### **My Happiness Plan**

In the unit’s final lesson, learners increasingly step into their role as self-authors by thinking of future goals related to pursuing happiness in their life and community and to effecting change. To start, I talked about the word *goal* and elicited examples of Mahida’s own goals. Next, I asked her to describe ways of creating happiness in her life. Following a listening activity in which I presented goals for bringing about happiness in my community, I had Mahida identify the tense (i.e., the future tense using “be going to”) and its meaning. With the help of the structure “To bring happiness in my life/in my community, I am going to \_\_\_\_\_,” Mahida crafted her own list of future goals to seek happiness.

**Teaching suggestions.** The whole class can make a poster titled “Our Happiness Goals”; on the poster, each learner contributes one future goal related to cultivating happiness in the classroom. Teachers then encourage each learner to choose one of the goals and make a commitment to achieving it by a certain date. Learners can collaborate with one another or even with other classes in order to achieve their goals.

If the available technology allows it, teachers can record learners presenting their goals. After the “certain date” passes, learners can discuss the progress they have made toward meeting their goals and tell how they plan to continue to work toward increasing happiness for themselves, the class, and the community.

## **TEACHING IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Conducting this study proved challenging, due mainly to significant connectivity issues. A weak

Internet connection severely affected the amount of time we had for classes; in some instances, the class had to be cancelled or was reduced to 30 minutes. In addition, Mahida’s microphone did not always work, rendering communication with her difficult. Another salient issue was that because of a limited bandwidth, Mahida was rarely able to record her voice on VoiceThread, making it hard to complete the project. I realize now that investigating self-authoring development does not have to limit itself to the realm of digital technology. Rather, the focus can shift to effective classroom practices that are conducive to self-authoring.

Teachers do have options if they teach online via Skype or through other computer software programs and would like to use CMC tools such as VoiceThread to teach learners in areas with low Internet connectivity. One option is to have instructions for using VoiceThread written in simple language, using imperatives and short sentences, ready to send to learners. Learners are then able to set up an account and make recordings in their own time. More important, following this approach saves time during the lesson and enables teachers to focus on key topics.

If that option does not work because the Internet connection is too slow, teachers can send the lesson via email and tell learners to prepare the lesson, answer questions, and return their answers. Teacher and learners can discuss the answers in the following lesson. Teachers can also expand on the topic by asking learners opinion-based questions on the topic or questions about their experience recording their text and receiving responses from other users. To some extent, this kind of teaching condition lends itself to the learner assuming greater responsibility and autonomy, which is one of the goals of self-authoring development.

In a classroom setting where use of digital technology is limited or nonexistent, one way to facilitate self-authoring is to involve learners more in their learning process. One option is to integrate learners’ own stories into the curriculum materials and present them as a

model in class, based on the *Learners' Lives as Curriculum* (Weinstein 1999) framework. In literacy classes, teachers and learners can co-construct a story where learners orally tell a story and teachers transcribe it. Learners and teachers then make use of the text to focus on the linguistic content by explaining and expanding on vocabulary words, practicing pronunciation, and discussing the topic. As a final step, learners tell and record their own story, drawing from their experiences.

Another way to foster self-authoring is for learners to be intellectual sponsors to one another—in particular to learners who need additional support for language development. Learners who are seeking guidance or relationships with individuals to feel a sense of community and connection can reach out to their peers, who can help them to build confidence. Teachers thus implement a mentoring or buddy program in their classroom and urge volunteers to sign up. Learners and teachers can, for example, decide on the expectations of this kind of program, the type of support that buddies can provide, and the frequency of meetings. In so doing, learners adopt a leadership role and are fully in charge of the various operations within the program. This kind of leadership opportunity paves the way for greater involvement in decision-making processes in the classroom and in the community and nurtures a desire in learners to effect change in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

My experience has shown that despite difficulties in using digital technology to explore self-authoring development, there are alternatives to cultivating it in the classroom. Indeed, the ultimate goal is to focus not on the integration of digital technology in the classroom, but rather on the learners themselves and their development over time thanks to effective classroom practices. Self-authoring is a process that requires time and may not be overt in its manifestation. There may be moments in the classroom when learners show self-authoring tendencies that may not be interpreted as such. Key to noticing

them when they happen is to be observant of learners' interactions with their peers, their teachers, and the language content. However, the onus is on the learners to acknowledge their evolution over time and their journey to becoming self-authors of their lives.

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**Lea Gabay** is a French-American ESL instructor who has taught ESL/EFL for several years in various countries such as Vietnam and the United States. In 2016–2017, she was an English Language Fellow in Senegal. She is interested in adult literacy and teaching ESL to immigrant and refugee populations.