

**Victoria University of Wellington**

**School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies**

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## **Fostering learner autonomy in the EFL young learner classroom**

From 2011 – 2013 I taught English to a group of Korean elementary school students aged approximately 10 – 11 years old. Due to low contact hours (approximately 4 per month), there was ample opportunity for encouraging autonomous learning, though at the time I did not take advantage of this. In this learning environment the students' L1 was used liberally to teach the L2, and my role was to provide in-class communicative activities to complement the learning material in the textbook. Crabbe (1993: 445) conceives of two domains of learning: shared classroom activities in the public domain of learning, and personal learning activities in the private domain of learning. In order to foster learning autonomously, he suggests teaching should focus on both of these domains and consider classroom practice as the interface between them. This essay will outline a 60-minute lesson plan that incorporates Crabbe's two domains of learning in four activities suitable for young learners in an EFL context.

### **Background**

Holec (1981) defines autonomy as the 'ability to take charge of one's learning' (cited in Benson & Voller 1997:21). This represents a challenging concept to integrate when teaching young learners accustomed to teacher-centered learning. Littlewood (1996: 431) argues that the concept of autonomy covers communicative ability, learning and personhood. He identifies knowledge, skills, confidence and motivation as the primary antecedent components of learner autonomy. In the teaching context described above, the emphasis of classroom teaching was knowledge and skills, with the L1 an essential part of the teaching process. Fostering autonomous learning can integrate this practice of using the L1. Williams and Hammarberg (1998) found that, in the first stages of learning, students' use of the L1 is intentional and has a 'metalinguistic self-regulatory function', which gradually declines over the duration of L2 study (cited in Ortega 2009: 49 – 50). In fact, for autonomous learning, the use of the L1 in strategy training can be preferable for students and has a greater impact than L1 instruction alone (Carson & Kashihara 2012; Macaro 2005: 71), particularly for vocabulary learning. Participants in Crothers and Suppes' (1967) study remembered 108 Russian-English word pairs after 7 repetitions. After 6 repetitions, approximately 80% of 216 word pairs were learned by participants (Gu 2003).

Explicit strategy instruction may not necessarily be the only effective way to promote autonomous learning and raise awareness of metacognitive processes for young learners. In a study of elementary students learning French, German and Japanese, Kirsch (2012) found that children seemed to naturally develop language-learning strategies in the absence of explicit strategy instruction. 'Strategies started off as general activities. These developed into vague techniques and eventually turned into more distinctive, concrete and specific strategies' (Kirsch 2012: 393). With limited contact hours, a teacher who wishes to treat classroom practices as the interface between private and public learning in order to increase the value of class contact hours, may influence students' likelihood of becoming more skilled autonomous learners over time. This is achieved by constructing these 'general activities.' Teachers should be aware of the fact that students in this age group are just beginning to develop the metacognitive processes to be able to independently implement learning strategies. They may also – as Kirsch has shown (2012: 392) – even have different ideas of what constitutes a 'strategy.' The following lesson is built around Chamot et al's (1999) model of task procedures for promoting autonomy. Ideally lesson plans should be flexible enough to accommodate students' enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for certain activities and so the suggested timing for each activity is an approximation.

## **The Lesson**

### *Language aims:*

1. Vocabulary building (and revising last week's vocabulary items)
2. Question forms: the verb 'did'
3. Writing in the past simple tense

1. Vocabulary building (and revising last week's vocabulary items) **15 minutes**

Warm up: Chain words (5-10 minutes)

This 5-minute warm up activity revises the vocabulary of the last lesson while ‘warming up’ the students by getting them talking. The students are seated in a circle, along with the teacher. The teacher says a word to the student on their right who must pass this word along the circle until it returns to the teacher. The teacher can vary this activity by passing more than one word around the circle at a time, or have words going in different directions at the same time. This increases the listening and speaking skills of students, warming them up for the activities to follow.

#### Horseshoe Vocabulary Game (10-15 minutes)

Prior to this lesson, students will have been tasked with memorising a bilingual vocabulary list of 15-20 words. The teacher will have printed the L1 equivalent to each item from the word list on A4 or A5 paper. The teacher arranges these on the floor in a horseshoe shape and divides the students into two teams. Teams stand at each end of the horseshoe and the first person from each team begins to walk along the pieces of paper, speaking aloud the vocabulary item in the L1 and L2. They can only move along the horseshoe if they give the correct English equivalent. When the students meet on the same word they play rock-paper-scissors, with the loser returning to the end of their team queue, and the winner continuing on. As a variation, the teacher can print the English word and have students speak aloud only the L2, or both the L1 and L2. The activity reinforces learner autonomy though it is performed in the classroom with the evaluative participation of the teacher (Gu 2007: 28). If students are unable to give the correct response, the teacher or their team members can assist them. The goal of this activity is for one of the students to reach the end of the vocabulary list having said aloud all vocabulary items correctly.

Students are more likely to be motivated to learn vocabulary items in their own time, as they know that the first portion of the next English class will be devoted to some form of kinesthetic or speaking activity involving the target language. Utilizing the students’ autonomous learning in this way can promote their willingness to take responsibility for learning the weekly vocabulary items (Lewis and Reinders 2008: 97). Besides aiding vocabulary acquisition through the repetition of target language (Nation & Newton 2009: 38), the game also functions as a kind of formative assessment for teachers. Observing and evaluating the students’ performance, the teacher can discern which

students have had problems memorizing the items in their own time. The repetition of items serves to reinforce learning and is also corrective; students can adjust to pronunciation norms and acquire the target vocabulary through this kinesthetic activity and the teacher can assess the students' progress (Reinders 2010: 44).

## 2. 'Did you?' card game **10-15 minutes**

This activity acts as a thematic and interactive bridge between the whole-class interaction of the first activity, and the individual writing in past simple to follow. A variation on the card game 'Go Fish', students practice making questions with the simple past form of the verb 'do.' Arranged in small groups or pairs, the teacher distributes a number of pre-prepared cards to students. This activity is most effective when utilizing familiar verbs. Students are instructed to interpret the picture on the card (for instance a person skiing) and ask the question of a group member, 'Did you ski at the weekend?' If that student has a picture of a person skiing they reply 'Yes I did' and if not, 'No, I didn't.' While increasing fluency, the target grammar also alludes to one of the communication strategies taught in an oral communication study by Nakatani (in press). In this study, instruction in asking for clarification and checking for comprehension – through interrogative questions such as 'Did you?' – led to significant improvement in oral proficiency tests (cited in Chamot 2005: 199).

## 3. Writing in the past simple tense **20-25 minutes**

When introducing the task, the teacher should project (on a screen or whiteboard) a piece of writing showing what they did in the weekend. This preliminary stage of modeling the task is critical for developing the kind of independent metacognitive awareness that underpins strategies for autonomous learning (Macaro 2006). The teacher then models the upcoming task of peer-discussion and correction by orally eliciting answers to the following questions:

What do you like about the writing?

What don't you like?

Are there any mistakes?

How can you correct these mistakes?

Can you think of any synonyms that could improve the writing?

The teacher should draw students' attention to verbs in the past tense, making that students know and understand the present and past tenses of these verbs, and where their use is appropriate. Students will then have approximately 20 minutes to write a paragraph describing what they did in the weekend. If students finish early, they can attempt to translate their writing into the L1, noting any differences or difficulties. When students are finished, they interact in pairs to read each other's work and discuss the provided questions, which should as well be projected onto the screen to guide students' evaluations of each other's work. Though Crabbe (1993: 448) argues that an important part of autonomous learning is being able to evaluate critically whether one is right or wrong, such a task may be beyond the scope of the individual student. Without coaching from a teacher, the student in this classroom can rely on the assistance of the peers. Another alternative is to have students address the evaluative questions on their own before sharing their responses with their partner/group and discussing any disagreements before coming to a consensus.

#### 4. Reflecting on the lesson **5-10 minutes**

At the end of the lesson, students spend approximately 5 minutes reflecting on the lesson for today. The following questions can be answered through individual writing, or orally, in small groups, depending on the teacher's preference for interaction pattern to conclude the lesson. Through answering these questions, students engage in meta-cognitive processes of paying attention to their learning:

Today I studied:

Today I learned:

One thing I said very well in class today:

One mistake I made today:

This practice should regularly conclude the lesson, as students will become accustomed to the process of reflecting on their learning.

Evaluation of one's own learning is part of the metacognitive processes of 'prediction/planning, monitoring, evaluating, and problem solving', giving students the chance to form learning habits that contribute to significant gains in performance (Vandergrift 2003: 464)

#### 5. Homework: Vocabulary list

A vocabulary list of 15-20 L1-L2 word pairs is distributed for students to memorize as homework, in preparation for the next week's lesson.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay has outlined 4 activities to illustrate how the principles of autonomy – or 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' – can be integrated into the context of an EFL classroom for young learners. Little (1995: 176 – 177) writes that, 'in formal educational contexts learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning', and incorporating practices of autonomous learning for young learners in this teaching situation could be problematic. However, critical reflection on the learning process can be encouraged through teachers providing students 'with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them' (Little: *ibid*). The 'tools' of a vocabulary practice task, a question game, and a descriptive/reflective writing task have been outlined above.

Crabbe (1993: 448) argues that a teacher who is aiming to foster autonomous learning needs somehow to 'exploit the activity for generalizations about learning', or awareness of learning that students can take with them outside the classroom. If a teacher carefully constructs lessons to encourage students to engage with learning material outside the classroom and integrates this learning into classroom practice, the classroom becomes

an interface for public and private domain learning. This can become an extrinsic motivating factor for students to engage in autonomous learning. The extrinsic motivation of being able to play a kinaesthetic horseshoe game, or a communicative 'do you have?' card game in this lesson reinforces students' willingness to practice autonomous learning (Littlewood 1996: 438). The chain words and rock-paper-scissors vocabulary items presented here include L1 as valuable for acquisition of the L2 (Chamot, 2005), structuring students' learning of vocabulary items outside the classroom into the lesson. The L1 may also be used in the writing task in order to raise students' awareness of differences between the L1 and L2, though its use by an EFL teacher in this respect would depend on the teacher's foreign language ability.



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