Lessons Learned in Helping Students Become Confident Autonomous Learners

Maritza Escobar, Language and Culture Instructor
Ling Wang, Language Learning Counselor
Foreign Service Institute

LEARN Workshop, June 5 – 6, 2019
The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC
Outline of the Presentation

- What is learner autonomy and how to foster it in language learning
- Introducing the “SWOT” analysis tool and the “Mindset” theory
- Introducing the “Four Strands” model for well-balanced self-study
- Sharing our experiences and strategies applying the tools and the theory
- Lessons learned
Learner Autonomy

According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”.

Autonomous learners are capable of --

- setting their own learning objectives
- Defining the contents and progressions of learning
- Selecting methods and strategies for the task at hand
- Monitoring the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes

(Holec, 1981, cited in Little, 2007)
How to foster language learner autonomy: Conditions

The following are some conditions for empowering learners to be autonomous:

✓ **Motivation** for language learning and for taking charge of their own learning
✓ **Self-confidence and self-efficacy** in language learning
✓ **Cognitive and metacognitive strategies** for language learning

A HOLISTIC APPROACH!!
How to foster language learner autonomy: Principles

The three interacting fundamental principles:

- **Learner involvement**: engaging learner to share responsibility for the learning process
- **Learner reflection**: helping learner to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning
- **Target language use**: using the target language as principal medium of language learning and learner reflection

(Little, 2007: 23-26)
The SWOT Analysis

A metacognitive tool used the business community for—

✓ understanding one’s Strengths and Weaknesses, and
✓ identifying both the Opportunities open to one and the Threats one faces

Applied to education, this metacognitive tool has the potential for integrating the aforementioned principles and conditions to help achieve learner autonomy.
Applying the SWOT Analysis to Language Learning

Students are encouraged to regularly use the SWOT Analysis to critically reflect on their learning—

- Realistically identify their strengths and weaknesses
- Pinpoint opportunities and threats
- Do strategic planning for their continuous language development
- Come up with their SMART goals
  - S: specific
  - M: manageable (not necessary always “measurable”)
  - A: achievable
  - R: relevant
  - T: time-based

Take control of the learning process!!
Carol Dweck’s “Mindset” Theory

GROWTH MINDSET

“Failure is an opportunity to grow”
“Challenges help me to grow”
“My effort and attitude determine my abilities”
“Feedback is constructive”
“I like to try new things”

FIXED MINDSET

“Failure is the limit of my abilities”
“I’m either good at it or I’m not”
“My abilities are unchanging”
“I don’t like to be challenged”
“My potential is predetermined”
“When I’m frustrated, I give up”
“Feedback and criticism are personal”
“I stick to what I know”

The image is from https://medium.com/
Adopting a “Growth Mindset” in Language Learning

Language educators can do the following to help students adopt a “growth mindset”:

- Foster the belief that language competence is a changeable aspect of development
- Provide regular experiences of success
- Encourage regular self-evaluation and positive self-talk
A Model for Well-Balanced Self-Study
Self-study should include a roughly even balance of the “Four Strands”

- **Meaning-focused Input**
  - Listening/Reading
  - Focus on comprehension
  - Large quantities of practice!

- **Meaning-focused Output**
  - Speaking/Writing
  - Focus on conveying the message using only familiar items
  - Large quantities of practice!

- **Linked-Skill Activities**
  - Deliberate focus on language features

- **Fluency Development**
  - Developing fluent use of what has been learned.
  - Pressure to go faster (4-3-2)
  - Plenty of practice on familiar topics using familiar language.

This model is based on Paul Nation’s “Four Strands” Concept (2013)
Our Experiences and Strategies

- Share with students the SWOT analysis. This exercise needs to be done privately. Explain the advantage of doing it
  - Ask them to define his/her own needs

- Model for them how to auto-monitor themselves.
  - Questioning themselves; using open and challenging questions

- Share with them the advantage on Positive Self-talk, physical exercising and sleep patterns

- Ensure that students have well-balanced self-study based upon the “four strands” model.
Our Experiences and Strategies

- Establish a daily routine that includes:
  - **Meaning - focused input activities**: Listening - Videos, podcast, FSI recordings, Reading - Extensive
  - **Meaning - focused output activities**: Speaking - use the reading to promote speaking, writing
  - **Language - focused learning activities**: Flashcards, grammar games
  - **Fluency development activities**: Shadowing exercises, repetition of their own work
  - Physical exercise
  - Breaks and sufficient sleep
Study case
Part I

Current Student's Voice:
Bad Memory, too old to learn

SWOT

S: Experience
W: Bad Memory
O: Improve Speaking using known elements
T: Self Defeating inner voice

Four Strands Model:
Establish a daily routine

Current Student's Voice: Bad Memory, too old to learn

Finding their own voice. What do I say? How do I link my thoughts?

Positive Self-Talk
Change to "I have a lot of experience. I know what can be done"

Strategies:

- The students record themselves talking about 3 different topics of their interest in English
- They find the recurrent words or phrases they repeated during the recording
- They work with their instructor to translate them properly in the target language

Go to slide #14
Meaning - focused input activities: Watch 3 videos, same topic, no longer than 3 minutes, pay attention to the message.

Meaning - focused output activities: Tell what was the message of the videos in their own words.

Fluency development activities: Shadowing exercises, repetition of their own work.

Four Strands Model: Establish a daily routine.

Language - focused learning activities: Create flash cards with expressions that are useful in different situations.

Shadowing exercises: Repeat some essential parts of the videos that you want to master.

Strategies:
- Record your thoughts about the message in the videos.
- Listen & monitor: Detect their own mistakes and correct them.
- Pay attention to linking phrases and grammar patterns.
Growth Mindset: The belief that ability can be developed through efforts and by embracing challenges.

Self-Monitoring: What was the easiest part in the videos? Why? What was the more difficult one? Why? What I did to overcome that challenge? What I would like to repeat or avoid next time?

Positive Self-talk: (lack of memory) I’ve improved 25%, next time I will get to 35% if I keep working, everything is achievable.

Positive and honest Feedback: Point out what worked and what needs improvement (instructor). Guide the student to analyze its own performance.

Sleep & exercising
Lessons learned: teacher to teacher reflections in promoting confident autonomous learners

Create a safe, cooperative learning environment

Start with an open conversation:
- Avoid bias
- Do not label people
- Avoid being authoritarian
- Be quiet and observe
- Stay humble
Lessons learned: teacher to teacher reflections in promoting Confident autonomous learners

- Let the students propose and express their ideas.
- Remember everyone has their own vision of the world.
- Do not project your own perceptions—let the students find their own road.
- Do not send contradictory messages.
- Incentivize students to question themselves.

“Growth Mindset teachers see struggling students as a challenge—learners in need of guidance and feedback on how to improve.”

https://www.teachit-so/mindset.htm
Confident autonomous learners

- Your investment by helping students to become independent learners **PAYS BACK REWARDS!**

- Level of satisfaction and motivation raise
- Level of responsibility and self-control raise
- Students become more proactive
References: