

Sharing the Power: Facilitating Learner Independence in the Adult ESL Classroom

Clare Myers

Research in second language learning suggests that “good” language learners are actively and deliberately involved in the process of their own learning (Stern (1975), Rubin (1975), Naiman et al. (1978)). According to Stern (1975), good language learners adopt an attitude of personal responsibility for their learning; they are aware of their own capacity to learn apart from the teacher and the classroom context. As teachers of adults most of us are committed in principle to the notion of learner independence and responsibility. However on a practical level, in the day to day activities of our ESL classroom, we are often confronted with dependent, passive, sometimes even resistant learners who are only too willing to let us assume total responsibility for managing their learning. Given this reality, we may find ourselves functioning as a non-authoritarian but otherwise traditional teacher. We continue to be the initiators of classroom activity, the primary motivators, the chief sources of information; in short, the “experts” to be relied upon and deferred to. Breaking the cycle of learner dependence and passivity in our classrooms may require a reexamination of our own understanding and commitment to the concept of learner autonomy, and a willingness to consider ways of “sharing the power”.

The fundamental principle which underlies the notion of learner autonomy is that learners who take charge of their own learning are not only more efficient, but ultimately more successful in the learning task (Knowles, 1975; 14). In the area of second language learning the benefits of increased learner involvement in classroom management and decision making have been documented and discussed (LittleJohn (1983), Allwright (1979), Holec (1979)). When learners are invited to participate in decisions about what is to be learned in the classroom and how it is to be learned, a different classroom atmosphere results, an atmosphere that is purposeful, highly motivating, and in the experience of LittleJohn (1983), more conducive to ‘deeper’ or ‘receptive’ learning. Learners who are less dependent on the teachers as the single source of language learning are pushed to develop new skills in learning how to learn; they are challenged to reflect upon their own learning strengths and weaknesses and to discover the wide variety of learning resources and opportunities which exist outside of the classroom context. As learners become more critical, more aware of their

capacity to learn on their own, they are led to develop what Wenden (1985) views as the key to learner autonomy—a repertoire of learning strategies that can be used to go on dealing with language learning needs and problems once a language course has ended.

If we accept the importance and benefits of involving learners in the management of their own learning, then we need to consider practical ways in which we might facilitate this process in our language classrooms. One place to begin is by examining four key areas in which we as teachers have traditionally controlled the decision making power. These areas are:

1. Needs Assessment: usually we as teachers diagnose the learner's needs, deciding what it is they have to be able to do with language at a particular level or in a particular course.
2. Formulating Objectives for Learning: the learning objectives of a course or programme of study are most often defined by the teacher and then 'presented' to the learners.
3. Designing and Carrying Out Learning Activities: teachers generally assume sole responsibility for determining both the content and the process of classroom activities.
4. Evaluation: traditionally it is the teacher who evaluates the nature and extent of the learning that has taken place for individuals in the classroom.

As facilitators of language learning, our challenge is to look closely at the above four areas and consider ways in which we might share some of the responsibility for decision making with learners themselves. The following suggestions represent a few of the many possibilities we might experiment with.

Needs Assessment

In the area of needs assessment, learners can be helped to identify and describe their wants and needs in a variety of informal and more formal ways. A group of beginning learners, for example, could be invited to map out a typical day, indicating those places or situations in which they regularly use English and feel an immediate need for increased competency. Learners at the intermediate and advanced stages of proficiency may benefit from regularly scheduled small group discussions or troubleshooting sessions in which needs, wants, and concerns are openly expressed. Needs analysis questionnaires can also be useful tools for soliciting learners perceptions of language needs (see Nunan (1988)). One such questionnaire, designed by Allwright (1982b) for more advanced and academically oriented students, provides a possible model which could be adapted for language and content to other proficiency levels (see Fig. 1).

ENGLISH NEEDS QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME: _____

— very low - low 0 medium + high ++ very high

NEEDS	HOW OFTEN?	HOW IMPORTANT?	LEVEL REQUIRED?	PRESENT LEVEL	CONFIDENCE?
Reading newspapers, magazines etc.					
Professional or academic books and journals					
Social conversation					
Academic discussion					
Business meetings					
Oral presentations					
Lecturing					
Telephone conversations					
Listening to lectures					
Listening for information (e.g. radio, TV)					
Writing research papers					
Business writing e.g. letters, memos					
Personal (letters, journals, notes)					
Note-taking					

Figure 1: Sample Needs Questionnaire (Adapted from Allwright 1982b)

Allwright's model asks learners to think about their language learning in terms of what they need to be able to do with English, how often they need to be able to do this, how important this need is to them personally and/or professionally, the level of proficiency required to perform well in the area of need, the learner's judgement of their current proficiency in the area, and how confident they feel about the accuracy of this judgement. Like all needs analysis questionnaires, Allwright's model is only useful in as much as the facilitator is willing to critically analyze the results of the questionnaire, and incorporate these results in the planning of instructional materials and activities.

Formulating Objectives For Learning

Bassano and Christison (1988) point out that many adult learners come to our language classes without clear or consistent goals other than "to learn English". They suggest that learners can be pushed to formulate specific and manageable goals for learning by filling out weekly goal sheets which can be adapted for language and content to all levels of proficiency (see Fig. 2).

WEEKLY GOAL SHEET	
<u>DATE:</u>	
<u>Goals For the Week of:</u>	
List your personal goals for the week. Then place a check in the blank on the left when your goal has been completed.	
(Sample Goals)	
_____ 1.	Read and understand three newspaper articles about environmental issues and be able to share this information orally in class.
_____ 2.	Attend an information session on recycling at the Public Library and take notes.
_____ 3.	Learn 20 new vocabulary words related to the environment.
_____ 4.	Engage in a conversation about environmental concerns with a native speaker and record my communication strengths and difficulties in my learning log.
_____ 5.	
_____ 6.	

Figure 2: Sample Goal Sheet (Adapted from Bassano and Christison (1988))

LANGUAGE LEARNING PLAN

I would like you to develop and put on paper plans for your learning in this course. To assist you in doing this, it may be helpful to reflect on the following aspects of your learning situation.

1. LEARNING NEEDS

In which skill areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening) do you consider yourself to be particularly weak?

Within each of these skill areas, try to identify and describe through examples some of the *specific* language problems you have.

2. LEARNING GOALS

Which of the above problems do you feel an immediate and strong need to address in this particular course?

3. LEARNING STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

How are you planning to work on your particular problem areas throughout the course? Please suggest:

- a) some classroom activities you would like to design and/or participate in during the course
- b) some possible resources you might use both inside and outside the classroom (eg. Language resource room; public library; native speakers etc.)
- c) some strategies you intend to develop and use outside of classroom (eg. listening to the news; keeping a learning diary; scanning the daily newspapers etc.)

Figure 3: Sample Learning Plan

More advanced language learners can reflect upon their own learning objectives in a course by drawing up a learning plan (see Fig. 3). Such a plan focusses learners on articulating their personal learning goals for the course, and identifying the strategies, resources, and activities they might use to achieve them. It has been my experience that learners are not particularly successful at carrying out this task unless it has been preceded by a similar sort of group activity involving reflection and analysis of commonly shared language problems. Therefore I begin by inviting learners to form small groups to discuss the specific problems they are still having in learning English. I ask them to make a list of general skill areas (ie. Speaking, Reading, Listening) and within that skill area, to describe in a precise and detailed way examples of their language difficulties. Again, learners generally have difficulty with this aspect of the task since

the tendency is to describe problems in a very broad way that provides little insight into the exact nature of their weakness. For example, under Reading Skills, many will simply write "problems with vocabulary". I push them to describe how vocabulary is a problem for them; is the problem lack of vocabulary, inadequate guessing strategies, learning and remembering new words; what exactly is the problem? After identifying specific problem areas, group members go on to suggest possible classroom activities which might address these difficulties. Each group records the entire process on large flip chart paper which is then posted and used as a focus of discussion. By experiencing this group analysis of common language problems first, learners seem better prepared to develop an individual learning plan for the course. Learners can be encouraged to periodically refer to their learning plans throughout the course, to modify them in light of changing needs, and to use them in gauging their success at the end of a course.

One other way in which learners can assume greater responsibility for individual goal-setting is by engaging in a process known as *contracting*. The contract is a written agreement to perform certain tasks and/or to reach certain objectives. It can take a variety of forms ranging from a simple statement of intention to a more formal and detailed plan of action. Generally, the process of contracting invites learners to define their learning objectives (What am I going to learn or do?); identify possible resources and strategies (How am I going to learn or do it?); provide evidence that the learning took place (How am I going to know that I learned?); and stipulate a form of external evaluation (How am I going to prove to others (facilitator and/or peers) that I've learned it?). For a helpful and interesting discussion of contract learning, refer to Knowles (1986).

Designing and Carrying Out Learning Activities

Learners input into decisions regarding the process and content of language learning can be encouraged through support for activities both suggested by learners, and actively designed and directed by them. Learning style inventories such as the one designed by Nunan (1988), (see Appendix), are useful vehicles for soliciting information about the ways in which learners prefer to learn and learn best. Knowledge of preferred learning styles can then be used by the facilitator in planning for a range of learning options or activity types. Another, and perhaps more direct way of involving learners in deciding *what* is to be learned and *how* it should be learned in the classroom, is to provide opportunities throughout the course for learners to initiate and control the content of the language class. Working individually, with a partner, or as part of a learning group, learners can be invited to take responsibility for, (ie. to design, facilitate,

and evaluate) a language learning activity or task which actively involves their classmates.

Evaluation

Evaluating the nature and extent of one's own learning requires a degree of self-reflection and analysis which many of our students may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with. As facilitators, we need to provide learners with ongoing opportunities to reflect upon and articulate *what* it is they're learning, *why* they're learning it, and *how* the learning is helping them to acquire new information, strategies, and skills. One way of encouraging learners to be more reflective is by inviting them to describe, in chart form, various aspects of the learning which took place in a particular unit or topic of study. For each of the four skill areas (Reading, Listening, Speaking Writing), learners could fill in a chart outlining the learning tasks (*what* you did); the learning goals (*why* you did it; the skills and strategies learned or practised); and the learning outcomes (What happened for you, what effects/benefits did the learning have, what did you learn about yourself/your language performance in the process?). Another useful tool for self-reflection is a learning log or diary, in which the learners records on a daily or weekly basis their successes and setbacks in studying and using the second language (see Fig. 4). Finally, self-evaluation forms, (in addition to or instead of teacher evaluation forms), completed both half-way and at the end of a course of study, can communicate to the learner a belief in their own ability to judge the effectiveness of their language performance.

<p>LEARNER DIARY ENTRY</p> <p><u>Week of:</u></p> <p>This week I studied . . .</p> <p>This week I learned . . .</p> <p>This week I used my English in these places . . .</p> <p>This week I spoke with these people . . .</p> <p>This week I was successful in . . .</p> <p>This week I made these mistakes . . .</p> <p>I'm still having difficulty with . . .</p> <p>I would like to know . . .</p> <p>What I hope to learn and practise next week is . . .</p>

Figure 4: Sample Learner Diary Sheet (Adapted from Nunan, 1988)

We have outlined a number of practical ideas which might facilitate increased learner autonomy in language learning. However in our attempts to implement these ideas, to involve learners in the process of their own learning, both inside and outside the classroom, we will undoubtedly face a variety of challenges and constraints. Not the least of these is the resistance of learners themselves who may well view our efforts to involve them as both threatening and irresponsible. In dealing with this reaction we have to accept that adult learners come to our language classes with definite and deeply rooted expectations about the nature of learning and the appropriate roles of teacher and student. We cannot expect learners to suddenly modify these expectations and become equal and expert participants in decision making. In the words of Holec (1979:34), "There is no question of wishing to force the learner to assume responsibility for his learning at all costs; what must be developed is the learner's ability to assume this responsibility." As facilitators of language learning we have a role to play in supporting and refining the learner's capacity to make decisions regarding their own learning. Gradually, but deliberately, we can introduce into our classrooms processes and activities that will lead to increased learner autonomy. Of course we need to have confidence in the learners' abilities to manage their own learning situations and this may mean relinquishing a view of ourselves as the most important controlling agent in the classroom. In other words, we must let our students experience authentic responsibility and independence in the language classroom. Only then will they be led to discover for themselves both the personal satisfaction and the linguistic rewards inherent in sharing the power.

APPENDIX

Sample Learning Inventory (Adapted from Nunan 1988)

HOW DO YOU LIKE LEARNING?

The following questionnaire relates to the way in which you prefer to learn, and learn best. Please put a circle around the appropriate answer.

1. In class do you like learning:

a) individually	Yes/No
b) in pairs	Yes/No
c) in small groups	Yes/No
d) in one large group	Yes/No

2. Do you want to do homework? Yes/No
 if so, how much time have you got for homework outside class hours? _____

3. Do you like learning:
- a) by memory Yes/No
 - b) by problem solving Yes/No
 - c) by getting information for yourself Yes/No
 - d) by listening Yes/No
 - e) by reading Yes/No
 - f) by copying from the board Yes/No
 - g) by reading and making notes Yes/No
 - h) by listening and taking notes Yes/No
 - i) by repeating what you hear Yes/No
 - j) other? please specify
- 3b. Put a cross next to the three things above that you find most useful.
4. When you speak do you want to be corrected:
- a) immediately, in front of everyone Yes/No
 - b) later, at the end of the activity, in front of everyone Yes/No
 - c) later, in private Yes/No
5. Do you mind if other learners sometimes correct your spoken language? Yes/No
6. Do you mind if the instructor asks you to try and correct your own language errors? Yes/No
7. Do you like learning from?
- a) television Yes/No
 - b) radio Yes/No
 - c) tapes/cassettes Yes/No
 - d) written material (eg. newspapers, magazines, books) Yes/No
 - e) the blackboard Yes/No
 - f) other? please specify
8. Do you find these activities useful?
- a) role plays (drama) Yes/No
 - b) language games Yes/No
 - c) songs Yes/No
 - d) listening to radio, tapes Yes/No
 - e) talking in pairs with other learners Yes/No
 - f) small group discussions Yes/No
 - g) large group discussions Yes/No
 - h) listening to guest speakers Yes/No
 - i) watching films and videos Yes/No
-

REFERENCES

- Allwright, R. (1979). Abdication and responsibility in language teaching. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 2: 105-21.
- Allwright, R. (1982a). What do we want teaching materials for? *English Language Teaching Journal*, Vol. 36, 1: 5-18.
- Allwright, R. (1982b). Perceiving and pursuing learners' needs. In M. Geddes and G. Sturtridge (Eds.) *Individualization*. Modern English Publications, pp. 24-31.
- Bassano, S. & M. Christison. (1988). Cooperative learning. *TESOL Newsletter*, Vol. XXII, 2.
- Geddes, M. and G. Sturtridge, (Eds.) 1982. *Individualization*. Modern English Publications.
- Holec, H. (1979). *Autonomy And Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide For Learners and Teachers*. New York: Cambridge.
- Knowles, M. (1986). *Using Learning Contracts*. London: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Littlejohn, A. (1983). Increasing learner involvement in course management. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 17, 4: 595-608.
- Naiman, N., M. Fröhlich, H. Stern, & A. Todesco. (1978). *The Good Language Learner*. Research in Education Series, 7. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner Centred Curriculum*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rubin, J. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 9, 1: 41-51.
- Stern, H. (1975). What can we learn from the good language learner? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, Vol. 13: 304-318.
- Wenden, A. (1985). Learner strategies. *TESOL Newsletter*, 19, 5: 1-7.
- Wenden, A. & J. Rubin. (1987). *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

THE AUTHOR

Clare Myers teaches at the Centre For Applied Language Studies, Carleton University. She has a special interest in the area of adult education, self-directed learning, and group facilitation.