Educating students to become lifelong learners

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> Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.
>
> Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.
>
> Chinese proverb

Introduction

Lifelong learning is now recognized by educators, governing bodies, accreditation organizations, certification boards, employers, third-party payers, and the general public as one of the most important competencies that people must possess. Promoting lifelong learning as continuous, collaborative, self-directed, active, broad in domain, everlasting, positive and fulfilling, and applicable to one's profession as well as all aspects of one's life has emerged as a major global educational challenge. Meeting this challenge will require changes in the way teachers teach and learners learn, as teachers take on a more facilitative role and learners take more responsibility for setting goals, identifying resources for learning, and reflecting on and evaluating their learning. (Collins 2009:620)

This paper will suggest ways in which students can be prepared for lifelong learning as described above in a foreign language learning environment. The approach suggested is the development of learner autonomy as practiced and described by Leni Dam since 1973 (Dam 1988, 1995), theorized by David Little, Ireland; since 1984 (Little 1991, 2007), and validated through research by Lienhard Legenhausen, Germany, since 1992 (Legenhausen 1994, 2003).

Lifelong learning and the lifelong learner

As can be seen from the Chinese proverb, the concept of lifelong learning is not new, on the contrary. However, fast and unexpected changes in our everyday lives, demands as regards flexibility at work (if one has got a job) as well as flexibility as regards being prepared to submit to new conditions and enter into new communities in a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world have put a renewed demand on the need for lifelong learning. This view finds for example support in the *Delors report* (Delors 1996) where lifelong learning is defined as follows:

> *Lifelong learning may be broadly defined as learning that is pursued throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places. Lifelong learning crosses sectors, promoting learning beyond traditional schooling and throughout adult life (i.e. post-compulsory education).*

The same year, the Australian National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) in a review of higher education defines a lifelong learner as a *person who takes responsibility for his/her own learning and who is prepared to invest "time, money and effort" in education or training on a continuous basis.* And it continues:

> *The individuals most likely to participate in learning, either formally or informally throughout their lives, (have) acquired:*
>
> *• the necessary skills and attitudes for learning, especially literacy and numeracy skills;*
>
> *• the confidence to learn, including a sense of engagement with the education and training system; and*
>
> *• willingness and motivation to learn.* (1996: 3).

Since the above publications, lifelong learning and the traits and skills demanded of lifelong learners have been extensively described and have been included into national curricular guidelines around the world.

Good intentions versus reality

There seems to be a unanimous agreement as regards the need for lifelong learning and what it entails, for teachers as well as learners in compulsory education. The intentions are clear, but what about reality? Have they resulted in a change as regards the way teachers teach and learners learn (cf. Collins 2009)? Do today's EFL classrooms / EFL teaching/learning environments cater for lifelong learning?

Based on my experience from working with hundreds of in-service teachers at workshops and seminars in Denmark as well as abroad over the last many years, the answer in nine out of ten cases is unfortunately "no". I am sure that all language teachers can subscribe to the thoughts and ideas behind the intentions. However, they are obviously more easily said than put into practice. I know that many language teachers see themselves confronted with inactive learners like the one in Figure 1 – a learner far away from the ideal of a lifelong learner: After having looked at the skipping rope for some time, the youngster gives up and exclaims: "It doesn't skip!"
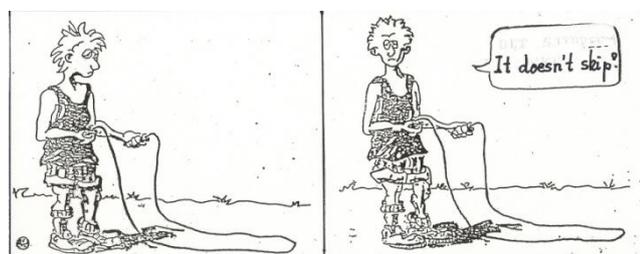
(Figure 1: The skipping rope – origin unknown)

Why can these youngsters be observed in many language learning environments? Why are EFL classes often full of students with no initiative? A possible answer could be that students are used to being spoon-fed or that they are used to being told what to do, either by their teacher directly or indirectly by the coursebook used in their studies. And even though curricular guidelines around the world more and more emphasize the importance of the qualities needed for lifelong learning, the reality is different. Ministries, school boards, and parents focus on good results at exams, an aim which is heavily accompanied by regular national tests which also focus on linguistic competences. This puts a stress on the teachers also to be aiming at good exam results, which in itself is not bad, of course, but not enough for lifelong learning. The drawback is that the teacher focuses on giving her students what Barnes (1976) calls *school knowledge: 'School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions.'* (Barnes 1976:81). The teacher is trapped in the vicious circle with inactive youngsters as illustrated in Figure 1: The more she tells her students what to do, the more school knowledge she provides them with, the less they take initiative for their own learning – a situation which leaves them awaiting further instructions.

The question is how this can be changed? How is it possible to combine a high level of linguistic proficiency and communicative competence in the target language with the skills and attitudes needed for lifelong learning? How can teachers be supported in educating students to become lifelong learners? A possible – and in our experience convincing - answer is the development of language learner autonomy in compulsory education, i.e. getting the learners in an institutional context actively involved in their own learning and at the same time preparing them for lifelong learning.

Developing language learner autonomy – a pedagogical approach for lifelong learning

Learning is a life-long process. No school, or even university, can provide its pupils or students with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives. [...]. It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn. (Trim 1988:3)

In his forward to the Council of Europe Report "Autonomy and self-directed learning: present fields of application" (Holec 1988), John Trim claims that the traditional subject-focused teaching is not enough if we are aiming at lifelong learning. He suggests instead that the focus should be on engaging learners in the learning process.

Learner-centered approaches in the 20th century

Similarly to the concept of lifelong learning not being new, the concept of getting students actively involved in their own learning, i.e. to place the learner and his/her learning in the centre is not new either. In the first half of the 20th century, the *reform pedagogy (Reformpädagogik)* in Europe focused on child-centred activities (cf. Potthoff 2006).

Parallel to this movement in Europe and with the same basic views on learning, the *progressive education movement* was developed in the USA. Here the writings of John Dewey (1859-1952) had a great impact on the movement (cf. Dewey 2009).

In Italy, the first *Montesorri school, Casa dei Bambini,* saw the light in January 1907, enrolling 60-70 children at the age between two and seven. By observing these children, Maria Montesorri (1870-1952) developed what should be the hallmarks of her educational philosophy and method: allowing children free choice of materials, uninterrupted work, and freedom of movement and activity within the limits set by the environment. Furthermore, she

saw independence as the aim of education, and the role of the teacher as an observer and director of children's innate psychological development. (Montesorri 1914).

In France, Celestin Freinet (1896-1966) started out as a primary school teacher in 1920 in a village school. He was determined to try out teaching methods different to the ones that he had experienced himself as a schoolboy. Furthermore, he got himself a printing press to assist his teaching. The combination of the two made him try out new methods. He had his learners work in groups, composing and printing their own texts and having these texts replace the conventional school books.-In other words, his learners were given the responsibility for their work in groups. The results made him pursue his search for improved teaching methods along these lines. Nowadays, the *Pédagogie Freinet* (cf. Freinet 1993) is still practised in many countries worldwide.

Focus on language learning

However, these approaches were not specifically concerned with language teaching and learning. Getting learners actively involved in language learning is first mentioned in the work of the Council of Europe in the 1970s. At that time there was a need to get adult learners to engage themselves in continuous language learning in connection with their search for jobs away from home. In his book (Holec 1981), Henry Holec launched his definition of *learner autonomy* in language learning:
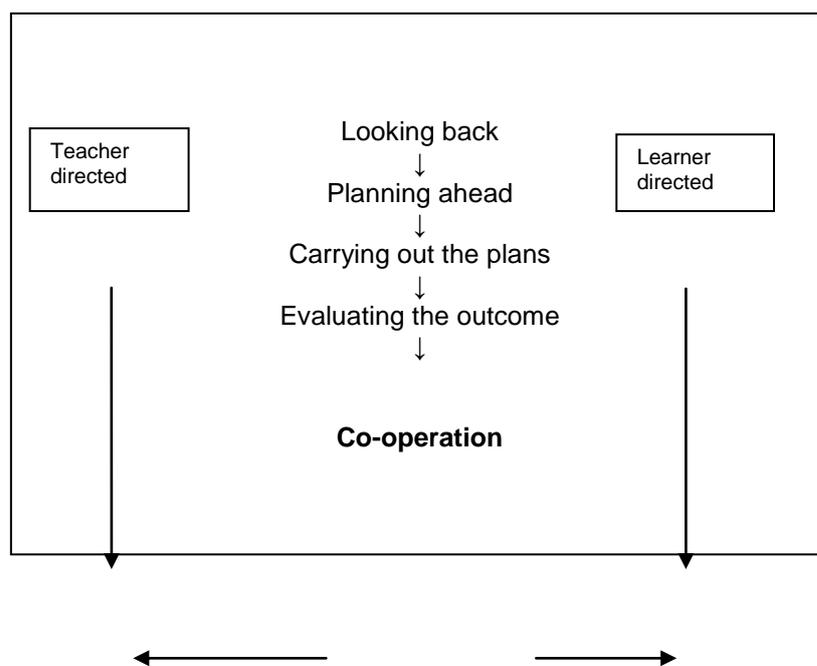
> *Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning i.e.to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, including:*
>
> - *determining the objectives;*
>
> - *defining the contents and progressions;*
>
> - *selecting methods and techniques to be used;*

- *monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);*

- *evaluating what has been acquired.*

Developing language learner autonomy

Figure 2 illustrates a simplified model for developing learner autonomy (cf. Dam 1995:31). The idea is that the learners gradually take over responsibility for their own learning, i.e. planning, carrying out the plans, and evaluating the outcome. They are expected – step by step - to be in charge of their own learning cycle.

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│                                                         │
│  ┌──────────┐        Looking back      ┌──────────┐     │
│  │ Teacher  │             ↓            │ Learner  │     │
│  │ directed │        Planning ahead    │ directed │     │
│  └──────────┘             ↓            └──────────┘     │
│             │      Carrying out the plans      │        │
│             │             ↓                    │        │
│             │      Evaluating the outcome      │        │
│             │             ↓                    │        │
│             │                                  │        │
│             │         Co-operation             │        │
│             │                                  │        │
│             ↓                                  ↓        │
│                                                         │
│        ←──────────→            ──────────→              │
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(Figure 2: Developing learner autonomy – a simplified model)

Learner autonomy is often misinterpreted as being learning without a teacher. This is not the case. In compulsory education, the development of learner autonomy takes place in close cooperation between teacher and students (Little 1991, Dam 2003).

An example of developing learner autonomy in a secondary school context in Denmark – a personal account

I began my career as a school teacher in 1964. In 1967, I moved to Karlslunde school near Copenhagen. In the school year 1972/73, I taught English in a 7th grade with 24 mixed – ability students , 13-year-olds in their 3rd year of English. At that time, the Danish Folkeskole streamed students after the 7th grade into A-classes (weak learners) and B-classes (strong learners). The selection of learners into the two levels was the responsibility of the teachers of the class.

Among my students were two girls, a clever girl, Kirsten, and a weak one, Birthe. Birthe and Kirsten were very good friends and in their English lessons they had shown me that it is possible for weak and strong learners to work together and to learn from each other. They had shown me some of the opportunities and advantages that pair work offers to a learning environment - for example peer-tutoring and social learning (cf. Vygotsky, 1962). Under normal circumstances, these two girls would be split after the 7th grade; Birthe would go to the A-class, and Kirsten would be placed in the B-class. In order to avoid this separation of the two girls, I investigated all possibilities for avoiding this. Eventually I came across a small paragraph in a new Act of Education launched in 1973, a paragraph allowing for *experiments* in teaching and learning (cf. Dam 1988). This paragraph made it possible NOT to stream students after the 7th grade. Just what was needed in my situation! I therefore applied for permission from the Ministry of Education to keep the class un-streamed in their 8th, 9th and 10th year of English. The permission was granted. The interest of the Ministry was to see if it was possible to take into account the different levels of mixed-ability learners in an un-streamed class at intermediate level.

Up till then I think that I could be described as a teacher who followed the teaching orthodoxy of that time. I used a coursebook in English as well as Maths – my main subjects - and I told my students *what* to do and *when* to do it (cf. Figure 1). And if you looked into my classrooms, the students would be sitting in rows facing the blackboard (the way they did in all their other lessons), and I would spend a lot of my time up front at the blackboard trying to teach them what they were supposed to learn (school knowledge).

All the same, I was quite optimistic as regards having to cope with a whole class of mixed-ability students at intermediate level. As regards the curricular guidelines, the difference from the 7th grade to the following grades would be higher linguistic demands on the students aiming at A-level College, as well as any other further education. This would for example include demands for passing oral and written exams with good marks. However, as the oral exams were compulsory for all the learners, I as well as many of the students in class would have to accept that their results in a school leaving exam might not be *that* good. Having this in mind, I felt that my main and immediate job was to find a way of how to get my learners personally and actively involved in their own learning. One of the challenges was to give them *all* a feeling of progress and thus support their self-esteem. I believed that this was the only answer to coping with the differences in class. The weaker learners were to be prepared for accepting the inevitable official marks; the stronger learners were to be challenged to opt for high marks and to use their potentials optimally. I found support for this view in Carl Roger's *Freedom to learn* - my bible at that time – and even today one of my favourite books:
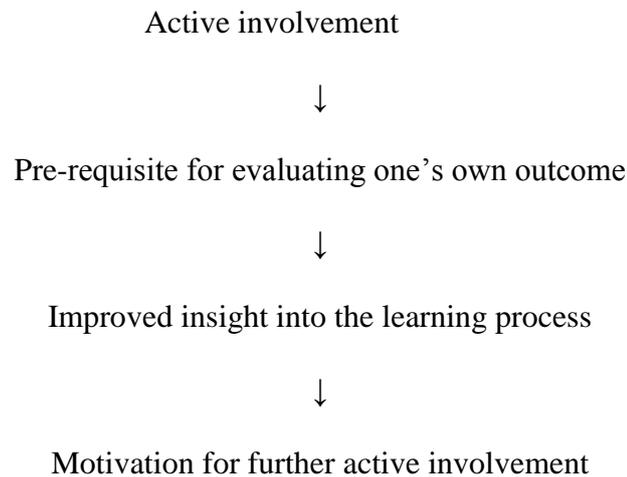
> *"The schools that kids love have the quality of active learning environments, allowing students to become shareholders of their own learning." (Rogers 1969:9)*

Even though I was convinced that I was on the right track, it was not *that* easy to get a whole group of 15-year-olds to work the way I would have liked them to. I was fully aware of the fact that this attitude was without doubt due to my way of teaching. Even though I had exchanged the coursebook for project materials in the 8th grade with lots of activities that *I* found interesting, I was still completely in charge of what was going on in the classroom and the learners had no say in the process. Furthermore, I blamed myself for not being "good enough". After each lesson, *I* would evaluate the lesson and *I* would come to the conclusion that I had to prepare the coming lesson better, find better activities, etc. So even though I think that I was well-prepared, I would spend even more time at home preparing things. However, little did it help!

So this is what I did: After having finished one of the completely teacher-directed projects – where many of the learners had been bored and inactive as it had happened before (cf. Figure 1), I lost my temper and banged my hand onto the desk so that my plastic bracelets splintered into bits and pieces. This in itself had an effect and legs were taken down from the tables. I then asked the class what *they* would like do next, of course within the possibilities and constraints given, such as available materials and curricular demands. In other words, I *forced* them to be involved in the planning of the next project by requesting them to come up with suggestions for what to do (cf. Figure 2: Planning ahead). Furthermore, I re-arranged the furniture in the class so that the learners were placed in groups.

The result was a success. By having had a say in planning what to do, it was more difficult for the learners to complain afterwards. In addition, by *choosing* what to do, even within the limited possibilities given, they all took a more active part in their own learning. By *working in groups*, they were also more involved than normally in carrying out a task and it became obvious that the learners felt *co-responsible* for its outcome. Also, their personal involvement in their own learning provided a good foundation for *evaluating the process*

during as well as after the project. In addition, being asked to reflect on their own learning supported their *self-esteem*, which again meant more involvement in the learning process. I had managed to break the vicious circle in Figure 1. Instead "A good circle" (cf. Dam, 1994:505), had been established:

Active involvement

↓

Pre-requisite for evaluating one's own outcome

↓

Improved insight into the learning process

↓

Motivation for further active involvement

Most important of all, I seemed to have managed to create a learning environment – for myself and my learners - which comes close to the one described by Rogers (1969:123):

> *"We are not talking about a method or a technique. A person-centered way of being in an educational situation is something into which one grows. It is a set of values, not easy to achieve, that places emphasis on the dignity of the individual, the importance of personal choice, the significance of responsibility, the joy of creativity."*

Even on a very small scale, this first attempt in 1973 at passing over responsibility to the learners for their own learning revealed to me some important principles for and when developing learner autonomy in an institutional context, principles that were to be pursued and further developed in the following years.

Basic principles and important tools when educating students to become lifelong learners

At the beginning of this paper, I claimed that the development of learner autonomy in compulsory education will foster lifelong learners. Let me point out crucial elements in this process:

Starts out from what the learners bring to the learning environment

Learning a new language is seen as a further development in the learners' lives. Therefore, learning in the autonomy classroom takes its departure from what the students bring to the classroom: their identity and their old knowledge – including their learning experiences.

Choice

This is how I, myself, started in 1973. I forced my students to make choices when planning ahead. In order to make a choice one has to reflect. And once a choice is made, responsibility for the choice follows.

The organization of the learning environment

Tables are placed in groups, not in a horse-shoe or in rows, catering for individual, pair or group work. Learners work on their own with different tasks independently of the teacher. This seating arrangement encourages forms of social learning and peer-tutoring. The role of the teacher is to support this learning, to be a co-learner.

Materials

Dictionaries as well as other reference books – rather than coursebooks – are available to learners. Internet resources play a crucial role when learners seek authentic information and materials for their work. Learners will also bring materials along. Samples of learner-produced materials to be used by peers are available.

Awareness of own learning / evaluation

The pivot of learner autonomy is evaluation (Dam 1995:49). One of the key issues in the autonomy classroom is the continuous evaluation of self and others. Self-evaluation and self-assessment of course enhances the awareness of their own learning, but it is also a pre-requisite for evaluating and assessing peers. Documentation of the learning process in logbooks and portfolios as well as the products supports this awareness (cf. Dam 2010)

Authenticity

The autonomy classroom is seen as "real life" with normal people acting as themselves, wanting to learn the foreign language. The set-up in the classroom is therefore authentic to this view: the social interaction between the participants is authentic, therefore the communication between them is authentic as well, and the tasks undertaken are authentic to "wanting to learn".

The use of the target language

From the very beginning the teacher makes use of the target language. As soon as possible the learners are also expected to make use of the target language when working in groups, when writing in their logbooks, when evaluating.

Concluding remarks

Apart from a high linguistic proficiency and communicative competence due to the continuous and authentic use of the target language (cf. Legenhausen 2001), I would claim that the autonomy learning environment provides its learners with what John Trim expressed in this way:

> *It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn. (Trim 1988:3)*

I will leave the final word to my learners. The class was asked: "After four years of learning English, how would you assess your overall progress?" This is what two of them answered (directly copied from their logbooks):

Nanna, 15 years old: *I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our "together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.*

Max, also 15: *Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That we worked independently ... And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own.*

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