Implementing Learner Training: A Case Study

by Linda Bawcom

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The degree to which a curriculum, syllabus, or methodology can aspire to be learner-centered depends largely on who is given the authority to make choices about what is to be taught (see Allwright 1990; Nunan 1988a; 1988b; Van Lier 1988; Yalden 1987). In my twenty years teaching in Spain, I've rarely witnessed students being given the opportunity to negotiate a syllabus, for example, since textbooks and syllabuses have already been implemented. However, there is one area whereby students can be given choice, at least in regard to the ways in which they wish to learn; this is by implementing learner training, a pedagogical strategy that aims to facilitate students' taking more and more responsibility for their own learning.

The institution where I began to implement learner training is a small private university in Spain that awards three-year diplomas and five-year degrees in the area of marketing. Students in this program meet for only two hours, once a week. This "intermediate" level includes 18 students, ranging from students who have studied no English (enrolled in a beginner's class), to those who could are considered solid intermediate students in an EFL setting.

In a learning environment where there are varying levels of proficiency, and knowing that I do not have enough class time to assist the very low level students as much as they need, I hope to present them with skills necessary to take responsibility for the management of their own learning (see Hill 1994; Oxford 1990; Clark 1987). I argue that the implementation of learner training, in addition to giving students choice, enables them to solve some of their own problems (see Allright 1990; Yalden 1987). Thus, along the lines suggested by Cohen and Manion (1985: 220-21) with regard to action research, this experiment begins with the identification of the problem to be solved and is followed by a review of literature on the subject. Once the material is created or adapted, the experiment is implemented, data is collected, and finally interpreted and evaluated.

Methodology

Phase One

The students in the first class were told how they should organize their notebooks and what resources were available outside the classroom for improving their English (e.g. films, newspapers, and reference books). These ideas, along with many more, can be found in Ellis and Sinclair's (1989) *Learning to Learn English*. Students were also given two handouts to complete: "The Good Language Learner," adapted from Prodromou (1995: 19). These handouts (see below) were collected and later returned to find out the results of the ranking.

Rank the following characteristics of the good language learner in order of importance (1-10), based on your own experience.

The good language learner is

- not afraid to make mistakes
- able to have a positive attitude towards language and learning
- able to set himself or herself realistic, short-term objectives
- a user of the language
- not afraid to experiment with the language
- able to assess (*valora*) and monitor (*controla*) his or her own progress regularly
- able to try out (*probar*) different ways of learning
- a good guesser
- well-organized
- aware of (*esta enterado de*) the language as a system

Note: These are shown in the order ranked by students.

THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER (Handout #2)

Number the following 1-13 in order of importance to you as a learner.

- Being able to express my ideas in English
- Improving (*mejorarando*) my pronunciation
- Learning grammar rules
- Talking to the teacher
- Writing correctly
- Reading books in English
- Talking to other students in English
- Not making mistakes
- Writing down lots of new words
- Finding out about life in English-speaking countries
- Getting a certificate at the end of the course
- Getting good marks on tests
- Improving my professional qualifications

Note: These are shown in the order ranked by students.

I was very pleased, in general, with the outcome of the survey noting that ranked first and second were "not being afraid to make mistakes" and "having a positive attitude towards the language learning." Certainly, these can be considered the first steps to becoming a good language learner.

The results of the second survey were also interesting in that students ranked being able to communicate first, followed by those items that they felt could eventually lead them to doing just that. I was rather surprised, since these were university students, to see that getting good grades

or a certificate were not so important to them. However, by the end of the course, when grades did come out, grades did seem to take on more importance! Also, it can be noted that "not making mistakes" being low in ranking here, corresponded to the first survey.

On the other hand, I was rather alarmed to see that "being a good guesser" was not deemed of much importance and yet, one of the fundamental strategies in learning a language is being able to guess, as can be seen in most textbooks for listening and reading exercises. In addition, in the first class I had just explained the importance of organizing their notebooks, especially for vocabulary, so I was rather taken aback by its low ranking.

In the second survey, what was obviously strange was that "learning grammar rules" was ranked third while knowledge of the language system is ranked tenth in the first questionnaire. While contemplating these low rankings and hypothesizing possible reasons, it occurred to me that the best way to find out why students had given these items such low ranking was to ask them by having them answer questions (see below).

Questions Regarding "The Good Language Learner"

Please write your answers in Spanish if you want to.

1. What do you think is meant by "being aware of the language as a system"?
2. Why is it not important to you to be a good guesser (if you ranked this low)?
3. Why is it not important to you to be well organized (if you ranked this low)?
4. In the second survey, what does "talking to the teacher" mean to you?

What I learned was that five students thought that "being aware of the language as a system" meant knowing a method for learning it. They ranked being a good guesser low because they said they didn't want to "guess"; they wanted to "know" in order to, as one student said, "avoid misunderstandings." As far as being well organized, the general feeling was that it was somewhat important but certainly not fundamental. In fact, they seem to understand this on a much broader basis than I had intended. One student stated that it was really a matter of the character of each person.

Talking to the teacher was important to them for two main reasons: for the teacher to correct their pronunciation, and to test their ability to communicate. One student added that talking to the teacher "makes the class more friendly!" What I learned from this was that in subsequent classes, the first three items would have to be explained more clearly. This left me only one doubt, which I should have asked about, that of writing down lots of new vocabulary. Perhaps, had this been reworded to say "carefully recording new vocabulary," the answers may have been different.

Phase Two

In this phase, I began each activity by making explicit what is often, mistakenly, taken as understood by the learners (Wenden 1983). That is, students were told what the "purpose and rational" (Nunan 1995: 136) was for each exercise and activity. This also means teaching the

meta-language necessary to communicate what strategies are being used (e.g., skimming, scanning, accuracy practice, fluency practice, listening for the gist) as recommended by O'Malley (1988: 158). In addition, as Cotteral (1995: 224) suggests, I began to introduce the idea of self-assessment with simple oral questions such as, "How easy or how difficult did you find the task?" If they found it difficult, I asked them why before doing remedial work in the next class.

Explaining the purpose and rationale for each exercise and activity was not always easy since at times it was difficult for me to understand myself what their usefulness was. To a certain extent, this "problem" was actually a good learning experience as I found myself skipping those exercises and some activities where I could not find a solid rationale for their use.

Phase Three

This stage concentrated on cognitive strategies with regard to "the four skills" and one category listed simply as "general strategies." Students were asked to think about their main problem areas and write them down. This led to a strategies handout, which I gleaned from many different sources including Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Oxford (1990), and my own ideas.

There was a total of 53 strategies. The General Strategies category included strategies such as "reviewing lessons often," "planning time to study" and "waiting for the teacher's explanation before translating." Examples for the others skills included Listening ("don't try to understand every word" and "listen to native speakers"), Grammar ("try to learn the strategies like a mathematical formula" and "if you don't understand a rule-invent one of your own") Reading ("try to guess an unknown word from the context," "don't look up every word" and "learn vocabulary for topics that are of interest to you"), Vocabulary ("buy a good bilingual and monolingual dictionary," "find a way that appeals to you to organize vocabulary," and "decide how you want to *know* the word"), and Speaking ("try not to be afraid to speaking," "use as much English in class as possible" and "practice using synonyms and definitions").

This took up almost an hour of class, expanding on some items and having to translate or explain the vocabulary to the low-proficiency learners even though I did try to keep the language simple and also because it was very (or perhaps too) long. In the last five minutes of class, I began asking students to complete the "One Minute Feedback Paper" (adapted from Chizmar's web site). This was extremely helpful in finding out what problems students were having so I (or they) could remedy the situation. There were three categories: Material Covered, Teacher, and Other. Students agreed or disagree on a scale of 1-7 with statements in the first two categories such as, "I understood concepts that were taught today," "I see how I can use this material," "The teacher was well-prepared," and "Instructions were understandable." In the section under "Other," students were asked to answer a few questions such as, "What problems did you have?" "What did you feel good about?" and "What does the teacher need to do better?"

I found that some of the problems they were having could be solved easily on my part by explaining instructions for exercises and activities, and giving more examples of grammar points and in a few cases, vocabulary. In addition, with regard to the listening exercises, I found I needed to grade the exercises more (and make them easier) and allow them to see the tape scripts

afterwards and follow along. A few students suggested that *all* the grammar, vocabulary, and instructions be in Spanish. I have to admit I gave serious thought to this because I could not help but sympathize with the low level students. However, in the end, I discarded this suggestion since I felt I would have been doing a disservice to the more proficient students, and I was already using more Spanish in class than I felt comfortable with.

After four weeks (i.e., four classes) of using the One Minute Feedback Paper, I changed to using the Self-Assessment Diary (see below), mainly because I felt that I had enough information about how I needed to improve my teaching and because although it is called *One Minute* Feedback, it sometimes took up to ten minutes, even though I allowed students to write in Spanish if they wanted to.

Self-Assessment Diary

- Activity:
- Purpose:
- What I learned:
- What I was successful with:
- What I had problems with:
- What I can do about the problem:

Students dutifully completed one entry into their self-assessment diaries for almost every exercise and activity. I found this activity not only time-consuming, but in some cases unnecessary, with the exception of the very low-level students. In the end, I became more selective and only had them complete it for those exercises or activities I felt were more demanding.

Evaluation

Van Lier (1988: 9) states that the primary objective of evaluating a project is to answer three questions: "Does it make a difference?" "How effective is it?" and "How can we improve it?" As stated in the introduction of this article, my primary purpose in implementing learner training is to give students some choice in the manner in which they learn. I believe that I met this objective, at least in part, by presenting them with strategies and options with regard to how they could each improve their English in their own way. Nonetheless, it is one thing to introduce students to new approaches that can improve their English, but it's quite another to get them to actually take the necessary time to implement those strategies themselves. As Widdowson (1987: 25) so aptly states, not all travelers are or wish to be "explorers of the unknown." So as to the question, "Did it make a difference?" I can state unequivocally that it made a difference to me as an action researcher and practitioner. I found I became more sensitive to my students' needs with the advantage of being able to improve my teaching, not only in the area of learner training, but in general as well. Moreover, based on the first two surveys of "The Good Language Learner," I learned more about what was most important to them with regard to their learning, and what strategies needed to be explained further as far as their usefulness.

However, with regard to my "hidden agenda" and students solving their own problems, the main obstacle was the time students had available to explore the use of the strategies. Almost all the students did in fact organize their notebooks and recorded new vocabulary in context. They began to wait for my explanation in English before nudging their classmates for a translation and even those at the beginner's level tried to stay in English as much as possible. In other words, they put into practice those strategies that could be done in the classroom. To my knowledge, no student tried any of the strategies that would have taken time outside the classroom.

I believe the project was effective with regard to students' recognition of their problems, and with some guidance, exactly where it existed and what options there were available for solving or at least beginning to solve their problems. However, in an EFL setting, students often do not have an immediate need for English, nor do they have any idea what circumstances they may need it in the future. Their motivation, therefore, is somewhat less than in an ESL setting. Thus, I believe my expectations were probably too high with regard to the results that I had hoped to obtain. My project was, in effect, too ambitious and too time-consuming. For that reason, I have made improvements, not with regard to the information I give them, but with regard to what I focus on. I now concentrate mainly on strategies that can be used in class, but still do ask from time to time for the "One Minute Feedback Paper" and "Self-Assessment Diary," which they keep in their notebooks.

In addition, Shannon Geary, a current colleague of mine, took the strategy handout (see Phase 3) and simplified it for the lower-level classes, creating a very useful handout, which lists those strategies that can be done during class (e.g., "wait for the teacher's explanation" and "ask your teacher for more examples"), or after or before the next lesson (e.g., "review material covered in class," "write new vocabulary in your notebook" "learn grammar patterns like a mathematical formula" and "under the category Every Week list items such as "buy a good"). Very few of the strategies are for work needing to be done outside the classroom, and the 53 strategies listed in my original handout was reduced to 28.

Conclusion

Implementing learner training, self-assessment, and feedback is not a panacea for all the constraints and problems that must be confronted in an ELT environment, nor will it be implemented automatically by students. It takes time, practice, and awareness on the part of the students and the teacher. However, withholding the opportunity to explore the unknown (i.e., new strategies) due to fear of failure by the teacher or the students would be, in effect, the very antithesis of one of the aims of a learner-centered methodology, which is to educate learners to not to be afraid to take risks. If students can be persuaded to take risks by trying out new strategies, are taught how to deal with problems, and are rewarded for their successes, then they are starting down the road to becoming more independent, successful, and motivated language learners.

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