Helping students become independent learners

From the analysis of the many roles that teachers have in the classroom we may get an idea what approach to teaching we adhere to. Teachers come in different kinds: some are humble and understanding. Some are user-friendly. A few may be knowledgeable and dogmatic. The way a teacher interacts with students may determine the kind of student they have: independent or teacher-dependent, knowledge-seeker or knowledge-finder, to name a few.

Time is short and students should be empowered to learn even without the help of a teacher or in the teacher’s presence. Learners should therefore use, apart from communication strategies, a number of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies that will ease their learning process and allow them to reflect upon their development in the understanding and use of the target language and to look for suitable ways of enhancing their learning.

Some of the strategies at students’ disposal that will allow them to take responsibility over the learning process are the following:

**Cognitive:** analogy, memorisation, repetition, writing down, inferencing, semantic mapping.

**Metacognitive:** preparing for and planning learning, reflecting upon learning, setting objectives, directing learning, self-monitoring and evaluating.

**Socio-affective:** initiating conversation with a native speaker of the language, using other people as informants, collaborating on tasks, listening to the radio and watching tv in the target language, spending extra-time in the lab or self-access centre.

Being a proactive learner, i.e. taking decisions over the direction to take, will allow the learner to learn more things and learn better than being a reactive learner who sits back and expects to receive information from a knowledgeable teacher.

Syllabi should change focus from the teacher to the student. A teacher who sets the objectives, chooses the textbook and supplementary materials to use, decides on a programme, plans lessons, directs the activities and corrects and assesses students’ performance may be held in the highest esteem by students who attend classes regularly, bring materials to class, do the activities proposed, study and revise and take tests as expected. And yet the result may not always be satisfactory for the majority of the students. When we analyse the possible reasons for success and failure, we generally conclude that the most successful student is the one who has taken the most interest, the one who has come forward in search for knowledge rather than have every problem solved by the teacher.

How long shall we continue to bear whole responsibility for our students’ success or failure?

For a number of years, in fact, teachers have been willing to encourage students to become responsible for their learning. More constructive approaches have been in use lately and teachers are more prone to letting students see and discover rather than listen and learn. Involvement has been part of teaching for a considerate length of time.

On the other hand, a teacher who uses a constructivist approach to teaching may not
always reflect the same approach in assessment. By encouraging students to apply the right strategies the teacher will ensure that the learning process will smoothly develop from setting aims to achieving objectives. Teachers will thus be relieved from having to make many decisions, and even from the burden of having to mark endless papers. The teacher will then assume the role of facilitator not only in teaching but also in assessing students.

One of the most useful tools at our disposal for training students to become independent learners is ‘portfolio’. Portfolio assessment will bestow some of the teacher’s responsibility upon the student. As a result students will gain self-confidence and the willingness to learn.

Assessing students usually brings up several queries in teachers. When marking papers we are generally seen as judges who can place people somewhere in a scale of marks. On the other hand, many times students get discouraged for having made efforts that do not render the expected results.

Portfolio assessment provides evidence of such efforts and will shed light over students’ worries, queries and problems in learning. After all, students will assess themselves all the time during the process, though at times not overtly so.

The main issue that arises is establishing a comparison between portfolios and regular folders, clarifying notions and setting standards so that students will be clear about the objectives to fulfil.

**What is a portfolio?**

A portfolio is a purposeful, selective collection of a learner’s work, self-assessment and teacher’s observations assembled over time as a record of progress and achievement in one or more areas with regard to specific criteria.

As such, a portfolio is an alternative approach to assessing student progress, which can include informal as well as formal and self-assessment.

Both the student and the teacher will decide which elements will be included in a portfolio. Teacher and student as partners in the learning process will negotiate entries and together decide whether such entries will become ‘permanent’ – and therefore be included in the content page- or ‘temporary’ – until a better rendering of the same work is finally produced. As a rule, each entry will be accompanied by the student’s reason for his/her choice.

The student and teacher might also, for example, choose to select a process sample to stand as a proof of how writing develops from brainstorming to selection and organisation of ideas to first draft to final copy.

In order to prove the student’s achievement in such various skills, we will find in portfolios some of the following:

- audio-cassettes
- videos
writing
- reading logs
- learning logs
- comments by teachers, parents
- pictorial material (photographs, drawings, etc.)
- charts, diagrams, etc.
- reports, certificates, diplomas
- evidence of visits abroad, talks with native speakers
- favourite pieces (readers, poems, etc.)
- tests!

**Procedure**

The procedure (Gottlieb 1995) in order to carry out assessment through portfolio keeping implies taking the following steps:

- **COLLECTING** material
- **REFLECTING** upon the choice and the effort made
- **ASSESSING** the representative balance of the piece (reliability and validity in comparison with other pieces)
- **DOCUMENTING** (making the portfolio an official document by announcing the decision of this kind of assessment to parents and school authorities)
- **LINKING** (building communication - horizontal and vertical- networks between teachers of parallel classes, parents-teacher, peer students, student-parents)
- **EVALUATING** the portfolio (Devising a marking/grading system by comparing the individual portfolios with a benchmark item that should have covered the objectives set.)

We are familiar with the feeling of apprehension that important changes bring upon us, so it would be preferable to follow this advice (adapted) from a group of teachers in Virginia, USA¹:

2. Develop clear rubrics so that students are sure of what is expected of them.
3. Do not over worry about time spent selecting the first pieces. Both teacher and students will soon gain experience and work faster.
4. Adapt existing curriculum. Do not expect to add this type of assessment as something else to do. Just consider it part of the process.
5. Have a partner. Sharing ideas with a colleague is beneficial to teachers and to students.
6. Make a collection of examples of alternative assessment or activities that could be modified for your students and keep a file readily accessible.
7. Assign a high value (grade) to the assessment. Students need to see the experience as being important and worth their time. Make expectations clear in advance.
8. Expect to learn by trial and error. Be willing to take risks and learn from mistakes, just as we expect students to do. The best assessments are developed over time and with repeated use.
9. Try peer assessment activities. Relieve yourself of some grading responsibilities and increase student evaluation skills and accountability by involving them in administering assessments.

¹ Virginia Education Association and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (1992)
10. Don’t give up. If the first tries are not as successful as you had hoped, remember, this is new to the students, too. They can help you refine the process.
One of the main problems with portfolio assessment is the bulk that results from several years of portfolio keeping. This aspect may be solved by organising the work yearly, and adding the collections over time.

The most important benefit, however, refers to the change that will take place in the teaching-learning process.

By using portfolio assessment we will be fostering strategic investment. Students will be empowered and they will become more responsible, autonomous learners who will eventually be able to:

- Fix their own objectives
- Decide on the content of a learning programme according to a personal needs analysis
- Select the learning method – inasmuch as a method is the order of activities and techniques to achieve an aim
- Self-monitor performance
- Use self-help strategies
- Self-evaluate progress

“Giving students the ability to progress independently without requiring the evaluations of others is a significant contribution teachers can make to ensure student growth in the future.”

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