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Practical Ideas on Developing Learner Autonomy for Young Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to present a lesson and sample materials to provide language teachers with opportunities to enhance and maintain learner autonomy for young learners in English language teaching classes. To this end, a traditional short story for children was chosen, and activities were created to help young learners develop a deeper sense of language awareness as well as encourage them to control their own learning. Initially, this practical paper introduces the theoretical background to the study. It then presents the methodology section where a model that promotes learner autonomy is briefly described and, subsequently, the procedure section where the activities involved in the lesson plan are defined along with their relevance to learner autonomy. In the end, following the class observations, several implications and practical suggestions are provided.

Keywords: learner autonomy, metacognitive skills, self-regulated learning, young learners, ELT classes

In order to assume responsibility for their own learning and undergo a change of attitude towards their self-regulation, learners, particularly young learners, need guidance from their teachers. As they learn how to plan, organize, monitor and evaluate their own learning processes, they ensure lifelong learning and success in language learning. Therefore, the main role of educators is to guide students on how to improve the efficiency of their learning before practicing second language skills through modified materials and learner-centred activities (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

According to Swartz and Perkins (1990), probing, assessing, revising, and testing learning through imitation and reflection “will promote further autonomous development of thinking” (p. 53). Finch (2002) underscores the significance of the aforementioned issue as follows:

It is imperative now that education focus on the whole person as a thinking, feeling, creative individual - a responsible member of society. If we are to address the myriad problems facing us, we need citizens with problem-solving skills, critical thinking

skills; people who ask questions, who set goals, reflect on achievement, re-assess the situation, and proceed in an informed manner (p. 20).

Similarly, Wirth and Leutner (2008) state that self-regulated learning is “a learner’s competence to autonomously plan, execute, and evaluate learning processes, which involves continuous decisions on cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects of the cyclic process of learning” (p. 103). As reflecting each other, the terms *self-regulation* and *metacognition*, indeed, serve the same function: to enhance cognitive skills and healthy learning stages. According to Fox and Riconscente (2008), “metacognition and self-regulation are parallel and intertwining constructs that are clearly distinct yet mutually entailed both developmentally and in their functions in human thought and behaviour. Neither subsumes nor subordinates the other” (p. 386). For Piaget, individuals have active involvement in their own learning, thereby accumulating new knowledge (Schunk, 2012). Actively constructing declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge may have an impact on a learner to develop self-regulatory skills, namely, planning, monitoring, and evaluating (Schraw, 1998). As a result, through self-regulated learning skills, they may become autonomous learners (Zimmerman, 2002).

When the pertinent literature is considered, there is a considerable amount of evidence converged at the same notion that metacognition can promote learning, and thus, improve academic performance (Cer, 2019; Çubukçu, 2008; O’Malley et al., 1989; Zohar & Barzilai, 2013). Further, research shows that self-regulated learning skills can be developed even at the primary school level (Dignath et al., 2008) and that language learners are often inclined towards autonomy (Balçıkcanlı, 2008; Kaya, 2016; Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıkcanlı, 2019). As pointed out by Paris and Paris (2001), “direct explanations about cognitive strategies, metacognitive discussions, and peer tutoring” can be beneficial to students at any age (p. 99). Therefore, when considered, these skills should be experienced at a relatively early age; the *onerous* task of promoting learner autonomy is assigned to the teachers (Dam, 2003). In sum, in the current century, it is plausible to note that teachers are challenged to gear their teaching towards autonomous learning even in primary education (Chalkiadaki, 2018).

Nonetheless, the concepts of autonomy-supportiveness of materials might not stand clear at all to the teachers (Kistner et al., 2010; Perry et al., 2018; Zohar & Barzilai, 2013), and hence, they may need more support with the implementation of learner autonomy in the classroom (Dam, 2003). Nunan (2013) offers a model that can be utilized to promote autonomy, considering the benefits and appropriateness for young learners. According to this model, autonomy can be implemented under the guidance of five levels of implementation: (1) awareness, (2) involvement, (3) intervention, (4) creation, and (5) transcendence.

Awareness is the first level towards enhancing learner autonomy. At this most superficial level, students are simply made aware that the learning materials have pedagogical goals, content, and strategies. *Involvement* is the second level, and learners get actively involved in their own learning through selecting among a wide range of alternatives of content and procedure. At the next level, namely, *intervention*, learners are encouraged to modify/adapt tasks. *Creation* is the fourth level where they can set their own learning goals and develop their own tasks. The last level on the continuum, labelled *transcendence*, is where learners are not confined to a learning environment. They experience learning beyond the classroom. Learners become researchers and start to teach themselves, thereby eventually becoming fully autonomous learners.

Following Nunan's (2013) model, this exemplary study aimed to offer teachers an autonomy-supportive, practical lesson for young learners which can be replicated in different contexts.

Methodology

This study was designed as a lesson plan with materials, activities, and instructions for each activity. To this end, a traditional short story was adapted from the British English Learn English Kids website (<https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/short-stories/the-lion-and-the-mouse>). The study offers a tried-and-true lesson plan for students aged between eight and 12. The lesson was designed under the guidance of the previously mentioned five levels of implementation of autonomy provided by Nunan (2013), more specifically, awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. In the first level, the students were simply made aware of the lesson goals. In the second level, they got involved in a wide range of activities. At the next level, intervention, they were asked to modify the materials and adapt some tasks. In the fourth level, they were asked to set goals and create their own tasks accordingly. The last level, transcendence, required the young learners to experience learning beyond the classroom.

Procedure

This section presents the lesson procedure in light of the suggestions and explanations above. It commences with a warm-up part and eventually ends with web research tasks to complete beyond the class. The rationale behind each activity, along with the relevance to the development of learner autonomy, is also explained.

Awareness

In order to get the attention of the students, the teacher makes a funny noise with her small squishy toy that sounds like a mouse, if possible. The teacher presents the following acrostic poem and asks the students to spell the first letter of each line and come up with the word STORY:

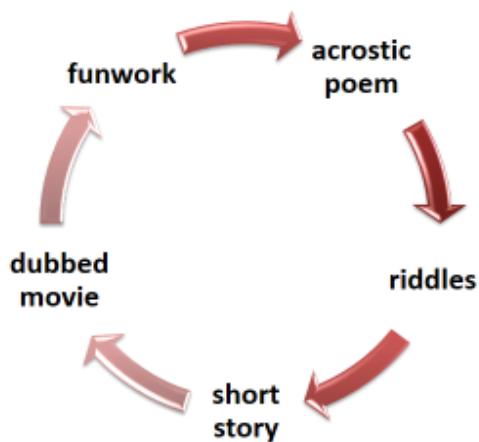
- ___pell this word
- ___o go into a magic world
- ___nce upon a time
- ___member how much
- ___ou liked listening to this!

After the students come up with the word story, the teacher states that they are going to read a story and do more. Therefore, in order to let the students become aware of the lesson's objectives, we developed the following illustration (See Figure 1):

Figure 1

The Objectives of the Lesson

What we have today



Through this visual image, the teacher makes the objectives of the lesson clear to the students (e.g., *By the end of the lesson, you will be able to find out the answer to the riddles by listening attentively, guess the target vocabulary by listening to the riddles, listen to a short story, act out some specific verbs coming along with the story.*). Then, she asks them to set their own learning goals for the current lesson. She supports the students to express their goals with sentences like *I want to tell a story in English.* or *I want to be the first to solve the riddle* and so forth. It is highly probable that setting their own goals will assist them in directing their next actions.

Involvement

In this stage, with some background knowledge questions through the riddles, the teacher helps the students to recall their past information on the body parts of the animals. Thus, she supports them to activate their prior knowledge and construct new knowledge. Riddles can be a fun and creative way to challenge young learners to foster thinking skills and have metacognitive experiences. They derive the satisfaction of solving the riddles. This would obviously motivate them to actively participate in the lesson.

The teacher first gives a hint that there will be two animals in the story, and students are supposed to figure them out. She provides them with a slip of paper on which there are sentences from the riddles with some words that have missing letters. The riddles we created can be seen in Table 1. The teacher reads them out, and the students complete the missing words identifying the sounds and letters. Then, they are asked to write the whole last two sentences and predict the animals. If they finish earlier, they might as well draw a picture of the animal in the square provided in the bottom right corner of their paper. This might as well ideally help students with kinaesthetic learning styles.

Table 1

Riddles

Riddle 1	Riddle 2
1. I am a w_ _ _ animal.	1. I am a t_ _ _ animal.
2. I am a very st_ o _ _ animal.	2. I am usually white, br_ _ _ or grey.
3. I have got yellowish-brown f_ _ .	3. I have got a po_nt_ _ face.
4. I have got m_ n_ .	4. I have got l_rg_ ears.
5. I have got p_w_ and cl_ ws .	5. I have got wh_ske_s.
6. I have got f_ _ g_ .	6. I have got a long hairless t_ _ l.
7. I love m_ _ _ .	7. I can run wit_ small qui_k steps.
8. I live in Afri_a and A_i_ .	8. I live ins_de or o_tsde or in the fields.
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
9.....	9.....
10.....	10.....

The students are provided with the correct answers as shown in Table 2 and asked to monitor and check their own answers and self-assess by scoring their performance out of 10. The main purpose here is to allow students to evaluate their own progress.

Table 2

Answer Key to Riddles (see Appendix for image 1 and 2 attributions)

Riddle 1	Riddle 2
	
1. I am a wild animal.	1. I am a tiny animal.
2. I am a very strong animal.	2. I am usually white, brown or grey.
3. I have got yellowish-brown fur.	3. I have got a pointed face.
4. I have got mane.	4. I have got large ears.
5. I have got paws and claws.	5. I have got whiskers.
6. I have got fangs.	6. I have got a long hairless tail.
7. I love meat.	7. I can run with small quick steps.
8. I live in Africa and Asia.	8. I live inside or outside or in the fields.
9. I roar.	9. I squeak.
10. I am the king of the jungle.	10. I love cheese.

In this step, the students are also encouraged to guess the unknown words—if they have any. At this point, they are not expected to use their dictionaries. If there is new vocabulary, then they are guided to ask their classmate or, at the last resort, the teacher. Hence, in a sense, they are supported to look for the resources they need and ask for help when in need.

Intervention

The teacher chooses around ten words from within the story, *The Lion and the Mouse*—a mixture of previously known and new vocabulary. The unknown words in bold and an asterisk are presented in the list that follows: (1) asleep, (2) laughed, (3) ran, (4) roared, (5) caught, (6) ***chewed**, (7) ***smack**, (8) cried, and (10) ***squeaked**. Using gestures and actions, she presents them, thereby helping them remember the previous knowledge. For the new ones, students are asked to find the meanings in a dictionary on their own. Thus, they may come to realize that they do not yet have full command of some words. This may help them see the purpose and benefit of dictionary skills, and thus, raise their metacognitive awareness.

Just before telling the story, the teacher provides the students with the following question: *How did the lion feel at the end?* By doing so, she gives them a reason to carefully listen to the story until the end and models an example of setting a goal. Students act out the

specific words above while listening to the story. In the middle of the story, at the appropriate point, the teacher asks students another question (e.g., *What do you think will happen next?* or *What is the little mouse's plan?*) to enable them to develop predicting skills. The students listen to the story, and the teacher elicits the answers to the abovementioned questions.

Next, the students are asked to do the following task along with the think-pair-share technique. To succinctly put it, they first do the tasks alone, then share their results with their desk mates, and finally the whole class. For this task, we created a tic-tac-toe grid which gives them a variety of questions to choose from. As can be seen in Figure 2, the questions are inserted into each square. The students are asked to choose three questions in a row vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Accordingly, they pick the ones they are able to answer or try the ones that mainly appeal to them. In this activity, the questions that particularly demand higher-order thinking skills are assumed to enhance their metacognition. However, the students are also provided with the opportunity to replace their own sets of comprehension questions with the ones appended to the grid. As a matter of fact, by doing so, they are encouraged to go through both the intervention and creation levels of implementation of autonomy.

Figure 2

Tic x Tac o Toe Grid

Name :		
Write down a new title for the story.	Why did the lion laugh?	Who do you think tied the lion to the tree? And why?
.....
.....
.....
.....
What adjectives would you choose for the lion? Write down at least two.	What is the funniest part of the story?	What is the saddest part of the story?
.....
.....
.....
What is the most unbelievable part of the story?	What does the lion mean when he says "You were right."?	Write down how the mouse felt at the beginning in the middle at the end
.....
.....
.....

In the next activity, the teacher asks students to work collaboratively in small groups (up to four or five students). The purpose here is to reduce their dependence on the teacher by assigning tasks that entail a team effort. Thus, the learners gradually develop a tendency

towards autonomy since learners have support and advice from each other as a result of the collaborative work. The students are asked to put their minds together and do the following tasks. First, they find the sentences told by the characters. The teacher explicitly asks the following question: *What punctuation marks can help us to find their words?* Thus, she helps them notice the language. One student finds the lion's words and colours them orange, the second student finds the mouse's words and colours them blue, and the third student finds the author's words and colours them yellow. The other two students find the three body parts in the story and the words that rhyme with the words *day, back, tree, and rope*.

Creation

In the next activity titled *dubbed movie*, students are asked to act out a scene from the story. Two students do a role-play. What matters at this point is that these two students actually do not speak, although they could move their mouths as if they were speaking. Two other students from their own small groups sit in front of the class, and they provide voice-overs for the action. To do so, the students are given masks to colour, or rather, they are asked to modify or create their own masks. In a similar vein, they could change the animals in the story and add some extra sentences or movements to the story. Here again, they are inspired to take active involvement in their own learning. The following illustrations in Figure 3 provide an example:

Figure 3

Examples of Masks (See Appendix for images 3 and 4 attributions)



Transcendence

In this stage, students are asked to reflect on their learning to help them become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They are encouraged to think about what they have learned so far or about the ways they learn best. Some sentences could be supplied (e.g., *I can identify words that rhyme; I can tell a short story or I can best learn the new words from my dictionary/my friend/my teacher* and so forth), and the students are asked to put a smiley face across the ones that they think they are capable of doing. This helps students realize for themselves what they can and cannot do. Through the tasks which they perhaps cannot yet

achieve with full success, they may realize that there is some gap in their learning. Therefore, it is highly possible that this self-assessment gives them the opportunity to adopt a new strategy to get better.

Finally, the teacher sets some web research tasks as homework. In this stage, the aim is to let “learners transcend the classroom” (Nunan, 2013, p. 200). In a sense, they undertake responsibility for their own learning outside the framework of the organized lesson. Ultimately, when they come back to class for the next time, it is their job to present what they have gained in the real world outside. The students are given a number of assignments that can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups (preferably not more than three students).

In these assignments, learners are given detailed guidelines about the content in each. We here offered a choice of two parallel tasks in each assignment type and encouraged the students to decide on the one that appeals to their own particular interests. However, some instructions might still look too directive and not appeal to some students since every single student has different learning needs, styles and preferences. Therefore, we also left more open space for learners to decide on the content. Thus, making choices from a variety of tasks or making their own decisions on the content allows them to get actively involved in their own learning. In fact, as pointed out by Nunan (2013), while enhancing attitudes of autonomy, “the actual task itself is less important than the act of choosing” (p. 198). The homework tasks can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

The Choice Board for Assignments (see Appendix for images 7 to 10 attributions)

Type of Work	Task	Guidelines
Individual Work	Write a diary entry	Imagine that you are the lion or the mouse. Write a diary account of daily thoughts and activities. Publish your diary entry in the school magazine. 
	Write a poem	<p>1. Choose an animal.</p> <p>2. Write an acrostic or use this structure to write your poem:</p> <p>Line 1 The name of the animal</p> <p>Line 2 Use two adjectives to describe the animal</p> <p>Line 3 Use two adjectives to describe your feelings towards the animal</p> <p>Line 4 Decorate your poem with pictures</p> <p>Line 5 Publish your poem on the school notice board.</p> 
Pair Work	Make a poster	<p>Do some research on plants with animal names. Make sure you include the following information:</p> <p>Give a brief summary of the plant (name, colour, habitat, etc.)</p> <p>The name of the animal and some of its features.</p> <p>Present it to the whole class.</p> 
	Make a PowerPoint presentation	<p>Do some research on famous cartoon animals that have real-life copies, and make sure you include the following information:</p> <p>Give a brief summary of the character (name, its role, etc.), the real name of the animal and some of its features. Present it to the whole class.</p> 
Teamwork	Create a radio show	<p>Work in groups of three. One student is the radio programmer, the host of the programme. And the others are guests from an international animal rescue team. Write dialogues for your radio show asking and answering the questions about how you help save the lives of animals. Act out your radio show.</p> 
	Create a fact file	<p>Choose at least two endangered animals. They can be from Turkey or from anywhere in the world. Look at the following headings in the fact file and make notes.</p> <p>Name: ... / Type of animal:... / Habitat:...</p> <p>Features:... / Interesting facts:...</p> <p>Make a poster for your endangered animals and present it to the whole class.</p> 

The teacher and the students decide on the deadline for the submissions together. It is highly likely that the teacher's getting involved in negotiating with the students over some issues will let students experience a sense of control over their learning. Finally, the teacher finishes the lesson by dropping a hint about the topic of the next lesson, which is mythological animals.

Conclusion

According to Reinders (2011), “it is not realistic to spoon feed students every day and then expect them to learn autonomously” (p. 186). In other words, as stated by Little (1991), “without active encouragement from their teachers” (p. 3), learners may have difficulty figuring out how to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. With some small modifications in alignment with the styles and preferences of the students, teachers can empower students with metacognitive skills that can help them understand their own learning (Schraw, 1998) as well as self-regulatory skills that can foster their lifelong learning (Zimmerman, 2002).

Therefore, in this basically practical paper, we aimed to provide language teachers with opportunities to gain insight into the concept of learner autonomy, particularly for young learners through activities and hands-on practice. On the basis of our observations, we could contently note that this practical study was immensely fruitful and attended to the needs and demands of the whole class by raising their awareness and developing good study habits. However, it might be helpful to keep a few suggestions in mind.

First and foremost, every class is a mixed-level class, and even though we, as teachers, tend to regard it as a single entity, it is fundamentally a group of individuals who need different kinds of input, practice, and assistance. Therefore, we strongly recommend colleagues adapt the activities in the present study but not directly adopt them or specifically devise new tasks in alignment with their own students' learning needs, styles, and preferences.

It would probably be best if teachers could speak entirely in the target language to the class. However, if the language used in the study is too far above their own learners' current proficiency level, teachers may need to simplify the language. Drawing on our experience, we alternatively specified a zone in the class where the students were able to use their mother tongue within a restricted time just in order to enable students to feel less anxious and express ideas more precisely, when necessary, but not very often though. This stood a good chance of motivating students to learn more rather than thwart them since it would benefit the second

language learners to cope with some feelings such as disappointment or anxiety and eventually regulate those feelings. In a sense, this zone also encouraged them to seek help when in need.

Based on our observations, we could note that young learners might not yet deal with the competencies to make efficient group work and would be in need of instructions about cooperation. Teachers should, therefore, ensure that the students are aware of the instruction of group work strategies before they work together in groups. Finally, in order to support young learners for the web research tasks set as an assignment in the current study, the teacher might as well provide them with some useful websites so that they can go on learning beyond the class in a safer way. We observed that when they came back to the class to present their research, they seemed to have an increased tendency to work in collaboration with their friends and to share the knowledge they gained.

To conclude, we discussed briefly the potential benefits of the supportive activities that can enhance autonomous language learning for young learners. In this practical lesson, we utilized a learner autonomy model suggested by Nunan (2013) and briefly explained how we related our materials design and development procedures to it. We hope that educational practitioners working with children will fruitfully draw on these practical ideas on how to promote learner autonomy in formal educational settings.

Notes on the Contributors

Senem Üstün Kaya completed her Ph.D. at Ankara University. She has been a lecturer and Head of the ELT Department at Başkent University since 2013. Her main study areas are based on teaching literature, short stories, stylistics, comparative literature, and gender. İnci Keçik received her BA from Ondokuz Mayıs University in 1996. Ever since she has never stopped learning, and she continues her studies with an MA degree in English Language Teaching at Başkent University. She has had the experience of working with almost any age group in different public institutions.

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Appendix

Note: The attributes and sources of visuals used in this paper are listed below:

Table 1

1. The name of the work: Closeup shot of a lion

Nature photo created by wirestock: <https://www.freepik.com/photos/nature>

2. The name of the work: Closeup shot of a brown rat

Green photo created by wirestock: <https://www.freepik.com/photos/green>

Figure 3

3. The name of the work: Selection of hand-drawn animals

Hand vector created by freepik: <https://www.freepik.com/vectors/hand>

4. A photo taken in the class

Table 3

5. The name of the work: Book and pen cartoon icon illustration

Book vector created by catalyststuff: <https://www.freepik.com/vectors/book>

6. The name of the work: Hand drawn quill

Background vector created by rawpixel.com: <https://www.freepik.com/vectors/background>

7. The name of the work: Ornamental garden plants stachys byzantine

Background photo created by Dragana_Gordic: <https://www.freepik.com/photos/background>

8. The name of the work: Wild animals

Background vector created by brgfx: <https://www.freepik.com/vectors/background>

9. The name of the work: Hand drawn world radio day

Music vector created by freepik: <https://www.freepik.com/vectors/music>

10. The name of the work: Closeup shot of a large turtle swimming underwater

Background photo created by wirestock: <https://www.freepik.com/photos/background>