Self- Directed Learners

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Abstract

The inclination to support teachers' self-directed development goes hand-in-hand with students' need to acknowledge their skills and direct their own learning. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the key features to address while planning for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) tasks, especially projects. A clear path is drawn for both instructors and students to understand the basics of planning, executing, and presenting a project that enables further student engagement and and—ultimately—sustained learning. By incorporating the most recent teaching methods into brain research to present meaningful experiences, a clear framework determines the necessary roles for both teachers and students to ensure full ownership when equipped with basic tools. These tools aid teachers in monitoring and assessing students' progress and process. Furthermore, it focuses students' attention on their observation of projects and highlights the effect of the project on their character and language acquisition, creating a community of autonomous learners.

Keywords: self-directed, project-based-learning, students' engagement, sustained learning, autonomous learners

Introduction

Nurturing citizens who are independent and seek knowledge is a necessity, not a matter of choice. Students need instruction that creates opportunities for stimulating questions and cognitive technology-based tools that engage them in the process of learning and result in a community of inquiry and self-directed, autonomous learners. The main aim of this paper is to enable teachers to identify the main features of learning based on cognitive studies, teaching methodology, and language acquisition theories. This should take the form of well-structured, planned projects that stem from students' own need to find answers for their inquiries on day-to-day subjects and discussed ideas and concepts. The key question is to determine the necessary roles for both teachers and students to ensure full ownership and engagement through the planning and executing of the planned project when equipped with the necessary tools.

Language Learning

Students' exposure to a foreign language as a second language L2 requires an essential distinction for teachers to notice: learning and acquisition. According to Crystal (2010), learning a foreign language is a conscious act of using the language in a defined situation, whereas acquisition occurs in a natural communicative setting. Students become focused on certain language features and usages, as opposed to fluency. Gaining proficiency is questionable; therefore, teachers' preparation of tasks defines the nature of their students' learning. Yule (2006) describes how "those individuals whose L2 exposure is primarily a learning type of experience tend not to develop the same kind of general proficiency as those who have had more of an acquisition type of experience" (p. 163).

Learning a foreign language is an effortful and complex task for students to undertake involving different language systems, cultures and ways of thinking. The Oxford Dictionary defines learning as "the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught." Slavin (2000) explains that learning involves the acquisition of abilities that are not innate. Furthermore, learning depends on experience that is associated with feedback from the environment. Brown (2007) points out "learning involves some form of practice, perhaps reinforced practice" (p. 8). Under several notions, learning involves active, conscious, and cognitive organization. Jones, Palincsar, Ogle, and Carr (1987, p. 4) have summarized the intellectual process in approaching learning in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Research-based statements about learning (Adapted from Jones et al., 1987, p. 4)*
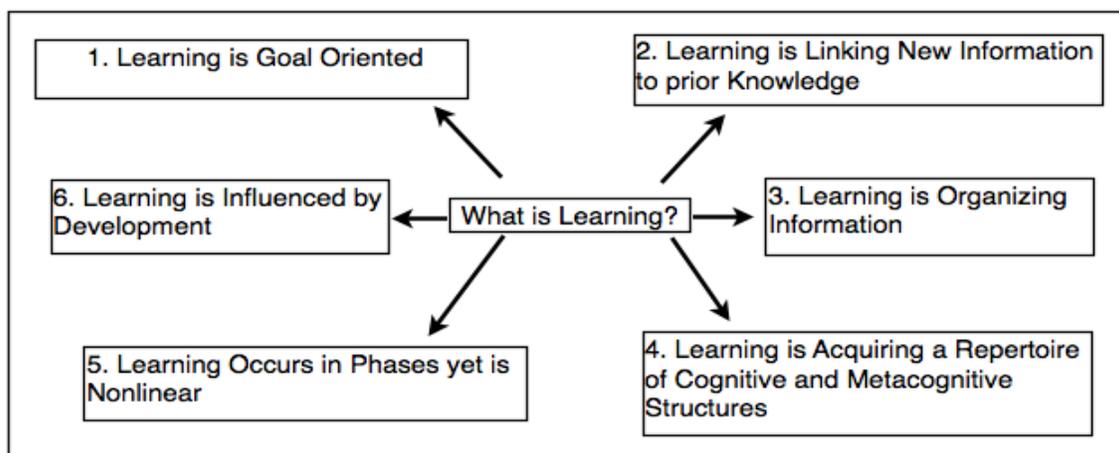
The emphasis of this approach is on the goals set by the skilled learner, which are to understand the meaning of the task at hand and to regulate one's learning. The information that learners obtain is stored in memory within knowledge structures called schemata. Jones et al. (1987) present three different "types of schemata: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge" (p. 10). The first is content-specific, consisting largely of knowledge of concepts and facts — the "what" of learning. The second schema consists of information that tells us how to do something — the "how" of learning. Finally, the knowledge of the conditions and contexts associated with specific procedures are regarded as the "when" and "why" of learning, respectively.

Brown (2007, p. 92) asserts that any learning situation can be meaningful if it applies to two things: learners who have a meaningful learning set and a task that is potentially meaningful. Figure 2 presents the process of meaningful learning.

Figure 2. *Schematic representation of meaningful learning and retention (subsumption). Adapted from Brown, 2007, p. 92.*
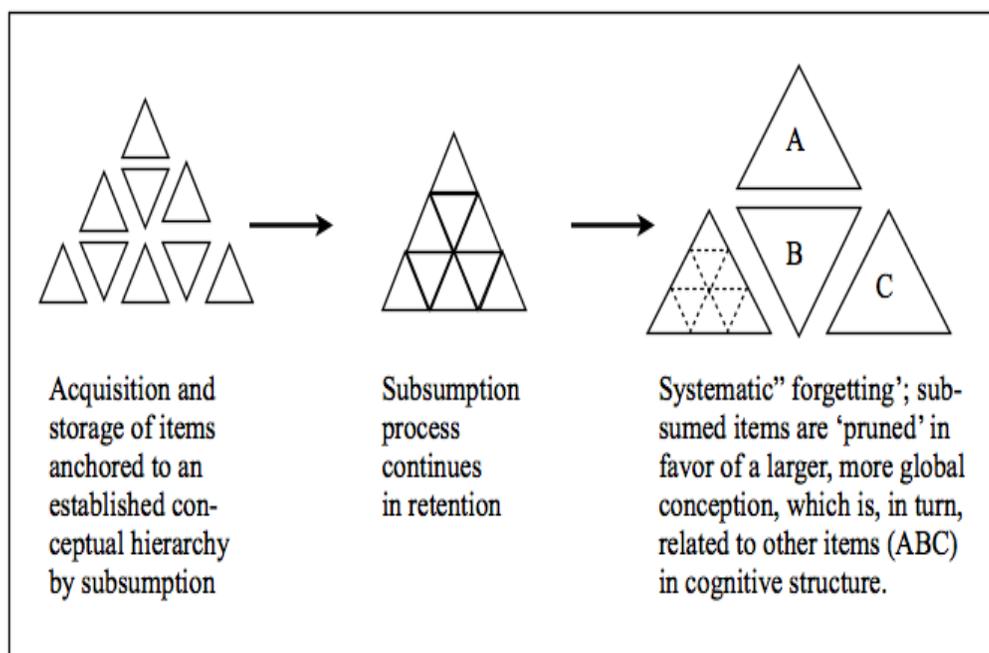
The learners' understanding is reinforced when it is presented to a clear repertoire of activities. Garnett (2005) describes brain activity while learning as follows:

> When the brain is exposed to a stimulating experience the neurons connect with each other. If this kind of stimulating experience is sustained then the connections between neurons are strengthened. If we can subject our students to lots of high stimulus material and challenge in lessons, then more neurons will connect and so increase learning. The stronger the connection between the neurons, the more effective and lasting the learning will be. (p. 9)

It is essential to revisit the obtained learning and demonstrate it, in order to keep the retained knowledge from being lost or forgotten, and to maintain the strong network connections between the neurons. As explained by Chall & Mirsky (1978), brain research suggests that "the verbal and spatial mode of information is important but what is more important is the organization or transformation performed upon it that establishes its constructed and remembered meaning" (p. 65).

The Nature of Language

People try to communicate their thoughts and ideas using language, whether written or spoken. In order for students to transfer their own feelings and express their thoughts, the first step is for them to acknowledge symbols that combine in the form of sounds into words that represent our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Chaffee (2012) explains that "most words are complex, multidimensional carriers of meaning; their exact meaning often varies from person to person. These differences in meaning can lead to disagreement and confusion" (p. 232). Understanding the different components of meaning can lead students to a better realization of the second language and its expression.

According to Chaffee (2012), the different types of meaning are the semantic meaning (denotation), the perceptual meaning (connotation), the syntactic meaning, and the pragmatic meaning. The semantic meaning represents the denotation of the word which shows the relationship between the linguistic event and the nonlinguistic one. It is clearly portrayed in the students' use of the dictionary to understand the representation of a new word or expression. The perceptual meaning presents the relationship between the linguistic event and the individuals' own understanding, as well as its relationship to his/her personal associations. The syntactic meaning represents the relationship between words in a sentence. The teacher can specify content words, the descriptive words that elaborate word meanings, and the joining words that relate words to each other. Finally, the pragmatic meaning presents the words uttered with the situation.

For instance, the word "computer" is defined in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "an electronic machine that can store and work with large amounts of information," which presents the semantic meaning. The perceptual meaning can refer to a desktop computer that your father owns and relate to your childhood memories of electronic games. In the sentence "My daughter owns a new computer that she spilt water on," the syntactic meaning shows that the content words are *daughter*, *own,* and *computer,* while the descriptive words that extend meaning are *new* and the connective *that,* which add *spilt water on* to the meaning. The pragmatic meaning carries different interpretations: It can mean that my daughter needs a new computer, that I need to take it to the workshop, or that I am not happy with her behavior and will do something about it. Therefore, the following steps can help teachers to pave the way to better language practice:

Step one: Sounds
Step two: Word denotation
Step three: Word connotation
Step four: Syntactic meaning
Step five: Pragmatic meaning

Learning Experiences

The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning has becaome a necessity. Teachers define their role as knowledge providers, thus hanging on to the idea that students receive information while providing. Their preconceived assumptions that learning will occur consequently deprives students of becoming autonomous. Crystal (2010) explains: "Today, the active role of the learner is an established principle. It is recognized that there are important individual differences among learners, especially in personality and motivation, that can directly influence the teaching outcome" (p. 388).

The guidance role of the teacher does not eliminate the students' need for direct instruction. Students need role models who inspire them and create learning experiences that support their understanding and usage of the language, as well as relating it to their community, life, and future. Ryan (2011) presents an interesting analysis of both inspirational teachers and pupils in which teachers focus on their students' benefits as individuals. Thorough planning and reflective thinking are essential to the teachers' development; in order to obtain a clear vision of both the teachers' own teaching and the students' learning, constant self-reflection should be incorporated in the teachers' practice. Al-Jamal (2012) asserts that "encouraging teachers to write about their teaching practice can bring significant insights and increase understanding about their practice" (p. 50).

Inspirational teachers create learning experiences that:

- Engage students in higher order thinking skills;
- Develop enterprising behavior;
- Develop their morals and value systems;
- Enhance emotional intelligence (Ryan, 2011) ;
- Activate students' role as knowledge seekers;
- Challenge and stimulate their brains;
- Promote and strengthen their communication skills;
- Strengthen their sense of responsibility in society;
- Enhance curiosity; and
- Value students' production and respects all responses.
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Figure 3. *Inspirational teachers, inspirational pupils. (Adapted from Ryan, 2011, p. 16)*
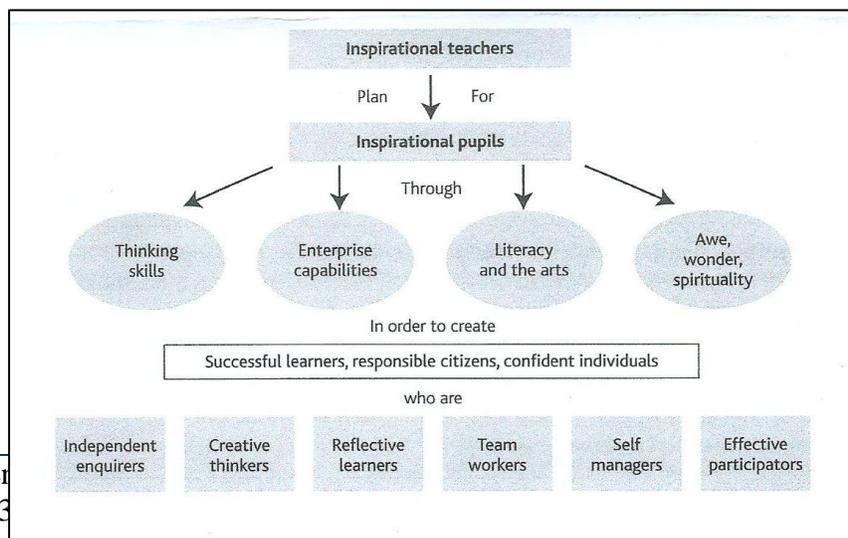
Natural Growth

Parents believe in the teachers' ability to help their children understand the world within his/her field, thus providing a complete picture of the world. Teachers can achieve this via aiming at lessons that should involve students in:

- Open discussions where different viewpoints are evaluated;
- Fact-finding and evidence proofing;
- Active and challenging tasks;
- Proposing thoughtful questions;
- Independent opinions;
- Organized and systematic approaches to situations;
- Self-discovery and understanding of one's own beliefs;
- Innovative directions and analysis; and
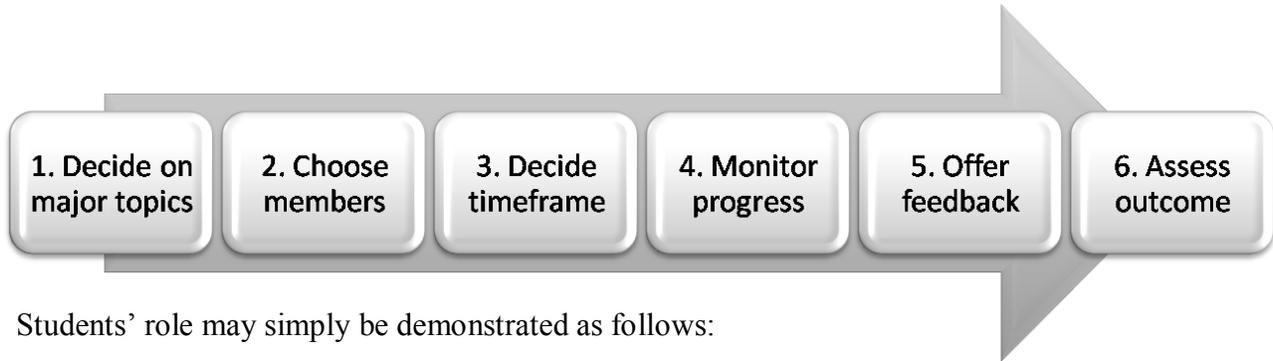- Effective use of technology.

There are four major points that facilitate students' learning and help teachers see the significance of their work. Griffith and Burns (2012) refer to them as "The Big Four": feedback, autonomy, challenge, and engagement. Both teachers and students need *feedback*. For teachers, this is related to determining the students' progress in order to aid teachers in directing the lesson. Students need feedback to judge the quality of their production and improve their work. *Autonomous* learners need sufficient time to refine their knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits; thus, the 30: 70 extends students' time to exceed the teachers' (i.e., students discussions and questioning exceeds the teacher's speech time). Providing differentiated learning with an open eye towards students' diverse levels will consequently *challenge* their abilities and result in further immersion within the lessons. *Engagement* ensures sustained learning through experiencing authentic real-life situations.

EFL Projects

Project- based learning is a starting point for autonomous learners (Thomas, 2000). It is not possible to construct a curriculum based on projects through the years from fourth to twelfth grade, due to the necessity of applying the assigned curricula from the Ministry of Education; however, it is possible to benefit from the main characteristics of project-based learning to accomplish the intended outcomes and ensure the quality of process and product.
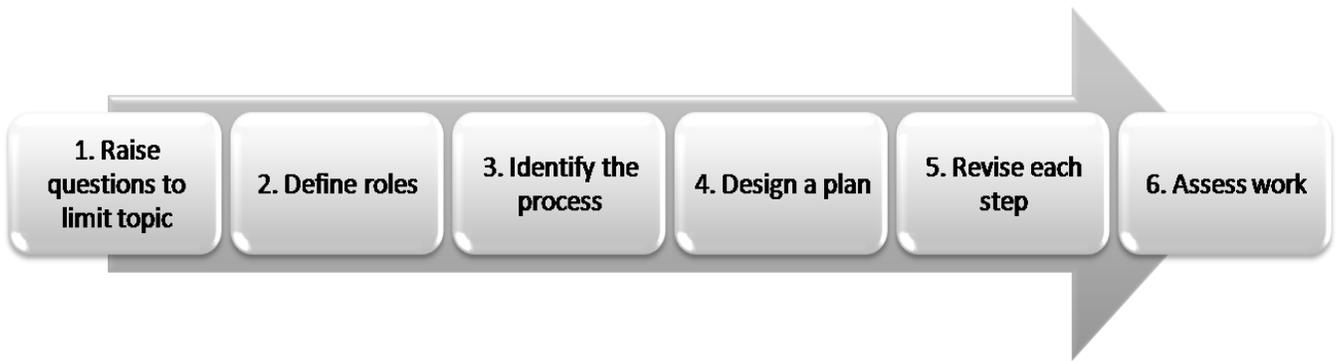
The following diagram presents the most important stages to ensure students' engagement in their EFL projects. The teacher's role can be as follows:

Figure 4. *Stages to ensure students' engagement*

1. Decide on major topics	2. Choose members	3. Decide timeframe	4. Monitor progress	5. Offer feedback	6. Assess outcome

Students' role may simply be demonstrated as follows:

Figure 5. *Students' role throughout the project*

1. Raise questions to limit topic	2. Define roles	3. Identify the process	4. Design a plan	5. Revise each step	6. Assess work

The following rubric can help monitor and assess students' development and product:

Table 1.   *Rubric to Monitor and Assess Students' Progress and Process*

Project: Class: Group Members:					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
1. Preparation					
• All group members contribute in the discussion prior to the setting of the project.					
• Students raise questions that limit their topic and stimulate thought.					
• Students give clear justifications for the necessity of their project.					
• Students decide on roles and time limits.					
2. Monitor Progress					
• Students work independently on the project.					
• Students activate their prior knowledge.					
• Students use different resources to support their findings.					
• Students keep records of their progress and an adjusted plan.					
• Students use the textbook as a resource.					
• Students use technology.					

	1	2	3	4	5
• Students demonstrate their work via charts and figures.					
• Students present innovative projects.					
• Students maintain group members' responsibilities.					
• Students use teacher's feedback to adjust their work.					
1=Excellent 2= Very good 3=Good 4= Moderate 5= Needs extra work					
Teacher's comments:					

The following questionnaire can help students understand the main points to consider in their project. It can be presented prior or after students' accomplishment

Table 2. *Questionnaire to Measure Students' Perception of Projects*

Perception of Projects	1	2	3	4	5
As a result of this project….					
1. I enjoyed the active learning style in this class.*					
2. The teaching style used matches my preferred learning style. *					
3. My team was able to complete the project independently.*					
4. This class stimulates higher-order thinking.					
5. The textbook used in class was helpful.*					
6. I developed a trusting relationship with my team.*					
7. The class developed my leadership abilities.*					
8. The class improved my ability to work in teams.*					
9. I can relate real-life situations to conceptual knowledge.					
10. This projects stimulated use of technology.					
11. I used various resources, including the teacher.					
12. The project fostered group discussions.					
13. The project developed conflict resolution.					
14. The project enabled me to link my prior knowledge to the new knowledge.					
1=Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3=Neutral 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree					
* Adapted from Okudan, G. & Rzasa, S. (2006)					
Student comments:					

The following questionnaire can help students' assess their skills and learning outcomes.

Table 3. *Questionnaire to Measure the Effect of the Project on Students*

• Effect of Task	1	2	3	4	5
As a result of this task….					
1. I am more willing to take risks.*					
2. I will be less afraid of competitors who may challenge my ideas. *					
3. I can analyze problems to study their structure.					
4. I have ideas for innovative products and services.*					
5. I can more easily make independent decisions.*					
6. I am more of a creative thinker.*					
7. I have a better understanding of my own skills.					
8. I better understand what starting my own company would be like.*					
9. I am able to raise questions.					
10. I can define my goals.					
11. I am able to revise my own learning.					
12. I am able to justify my choices.					
13. I have realized my important role in society.					
1=Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3=Neutral 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree					
* Adapted from Okudan, G. & Rzasa, S. (2006)					
Student commenst:					

Conclusion

Incorporating projects into students' daily schedules may increase their autonomy. Hence, creating tasks that provide authentic experiences for students to cooperate and rely on their own skills will enable for further self-exploration and realization of strengths, possibilities, and the necessary cognitive, physical and social skills. Thus, teachers need to:

- Identify their major roles as instructors through a well- designed process to incorporate EFL projects;
- Clarify the students' role with a clear framework;
- Use specific tools to monitor and their assess students' progress and process;
- Measure their students' perception of projects; and
- Measure the effect of the project on students.

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