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THE INTERVIEW:
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ETAS J – linking the needs of English teachers and language professionals

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Fostering student voice, choice, and autonomy in the foreign language classroom

Abstract

Giving our students voice and choice can increase their confidence in the foreign language classroom and help them become more autonomous. This can have beneficial consequences for our students' futures, as well as positive repercussions on our teaching style and classroom dynamics.

Biography

Agnès Demornex is an English as a second language teacher at Webster University Geneva and a teacher trainer at Haute école pédagogique du canton de Vaud, Lausanne. With an MA in English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education, her research interests include Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and sound technology integration. She is head of the Kamilala committee, which organizes a yearly competition of plurilingual kamishibais in francophone Switzerland, which involves the Japanese art of storytelling in French along with the integration of several other languages.



Fostering student voice, choice, and autonomy in the foreign language classroom

In any given classroom, diversity and heterogeneity are the norm.

No two students are engaged the same way, even if they share commonalities. Not all students with autism, for example, are engaged in the same way, just as not all boys are engaged in the same way, and not all African American students are engaged the same way. Even identical twins have different perspectives and experiences that shape their unique interests. No two students are alike. Nor is any one student the same for very long. (Rapp, 2014, p. 19)

If our students are all different and in constant evolution, we should cater as much as possible to those differences and fluctuations. Giving our students options and asking them for their input and their opinion by giving them choices and a voice is a very good start. In this article, my goal is to present how voice and choice along with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles can help foster student autonomy. I will first explain voice and choice, present the diversity and flexibility of UDL principles, and explain the repercussions of voice and choice for students and their future.

Voice and choice are at the core of a supportive and inclusive learning environment which values student ideas. They can increase motivation and self-confidence.

One of the most effective ways to catch students' interests and encourage them to attend to important information is to provide choice and autonomy. Students can choose the process used to accomplish a task, the tools or materials used during the process, and the product they create to show their learning. (Rapp, 2014, p. 18)

We know that language learning involves both the cognitive and affective domains and that affective factors influence Second

Language Acquisition (SLA). The good news is that the foreign language classroom is an ideal terrain in which to encourage a supportive learning environment based on voice and choice, especially when combined with the application of UDL principles.

UDL is a constructivist inclusive educational approach that consists of asking students for their input and giving them the possibility of making choices when it comes to their learning. UDL principles can help us provide a flexible and more student-centred environment. The three UDL principles involve multiple strategies in order to help all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2002):

1. By providing multiple means of representation and offering flexible ways to present "what" we teach (what students perceive)
2. By providing multiple means of action and expression and offering flexible options for "how" students learn and express what they know (how they process what they learn)
3. By providing multiple means of engagement by offering flexible options for generating and sustaining motivation - the "why" of learning (what interests and motivates students)

In the foreign language classroom, this multiplicity of means of representation, action, and engagement with the content creates a perfect platform to provide the repeated utterances and contacts that our students need with new vocabulary words and expressions in order to better retain them. Moreover, the multiplicity of interactions provided by UDL with the course content also makes it easy to find plenty of opportunities to integrate voice and choice. Asking students to choose within these multiple ways of learning, to show what they know, and to meaningfully express themselves and their opinion in the target language, makes us listen to and hear what they have to say. It also lets our young learners know that we care about what they think and what matters to them. By asking students to express their opinion, we create an autonomy-supportive student-centred climate which can enhance their self-confidence and belief in their capabilities. When students feel competent, they are more likely to excel.

But practically speaking, how can one give students voice and choice in the foreign language classroom? Here are some ideas:

1. During the course of an assignment, voice and choice could entail students answering questions and expressing their opinion on topics such as these:
 - Who will work with me? What is the scope of my topic?
 - Which resources will I need? Where do I begin? How?
 - How will I monitor and assess my progress?
 - How will I show what I have learned?
 And at the end of a task:
 - What worked? What did not? What do I need to work towards? What is my next goal?

This helps students reflect on what they have acquired and can do so that they can set goals for further improvement.

2. At any age, students can be ready to take on new tasks themselves:
 - At 5 years old, it may be deciding which centre to do first during independent work time.

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At 10 years old, it may be deciding which book to read for a book circle and developing discussion questions for the group. At 12 years old, it may be contributing to the creation of their evaluation criteria, or selecting the audience for which they are creating their work.

At 14 years old, it may be starting an extracurricular club and facilitating the meetings, setting their own learning goals, and choosing steps they are going to take in order to complete an assignment.

3. Free websites like Wakelet* or Digibunch** can help you narrow down a list of sources that students can choose from in order to learn about a topic. You could pre-select videos for students to watch or articles to read. Students would then pick the ones they are more interested in.

When we let students contribute to the curriculum, it places them at the centre of their own learning process.

This does not mean that students will direct everything. “As long as the choices are appropriate—not too easy and not too challenging—providing choice increases interest and engagement” (Rapp, 2014, p.18). Choices need to be aligned with our learning goals, curriculum, and competency standards. Choice will therefore never be wide open. The teacher’s role is to scaffold and guide students towards increased autonomy. For the teacher, letting go a bit of control can be very beneficial because our learners can gain personal insight from their good as well as from their poor choices. If they are not given this chance, they will miss the opportunity to progress and fail forward.

Our mission is to prepare our young English language learners for the future and for jobs that do not yet exist. We need to give them the tools to face these challenges and uncertainties with resilience and resourcefulness. “To create lifelong learners, it is essential to support students’ ability to regulate their own learning” (Hall, Meyer & Rose, 2012, p.19). We need to use many autonomy-supportive practices in order to foster self-directed young learners. By asking students to organize their work, we develop their proaction and self-organization skills. By asking them to self or peer-evaluate, we teach them to self-reflect and self-regulate their work. These decision-making and problem-solving skills and opportunities for increased personal responsibility will foster their autonomy over time.

While managing choices can be challenging, the benefits in terms of personal and academic growth are worth the effort. These tools will help our students be future, college and career-ready. We want them to become informed leaders and to reach their full potential. We need to foster their self-empowerment and personal growth by giving them the space to take more responsibility and ownership of the work they produce. This will lead to more agency and autonomy. We need to value our young learners’ right to speak and to be heard because their voices can become powerful catalysts for change.

Moreover, our own choices as teachers are also fundamental: they have far-reaching consequences. Jim Cummins tells us that our choices as educators are powerful because “(...) educators do have choices in the way they structure classroom interactions and in the messages about identity they communicate to their students” (Cummins, 2001, p. 653). By asking our students to make decisions in regard to their own learning, and by asking for their opinion, we send a powerful message; one that says: “I trust your ability and I believe in your potential.”

*<https://wakelet.com/>

**<https://ladigitale.dev/digibunch/#/>

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