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## **THE FIRST FIVE DAYS: ESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS FOR FACILITATING LEARNER AUTONOMY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Facilitating lifelong language learning amongst students is a frequently mentioned goal of many language teachers. Teachers want their students to fall in love with the cultures and languages they have dedicated their lives to studying. However, igniting the spark for learning beyond the classroom can be a real challenge. In the current educational culture where motivation for learning is too often focused on extrinsic motivations like passing tests and making good grades, how do teachers redirect students toward intrinsic motivations like a love for learning? Research into various fields of study have provided evidence that it typically takes at least ten years of concerted effort to master most skills. From this premise it stands to reason that in order for language learners to reach higher levels of language proficiency, there is a need to promote learner autonomy that extends learning beyond the language classes students take in schools. Facilitating learner autonomy requires a reconceptualization of the way language classes are structured. Building upon goal theories, task-based language learning, and deep reflection within a transparent learning framework can help to provide students with the skills to continue learning beyond the classroom. This framework can set students on a more self-directed path toward language learning that is both intrinsically motivating and engaging. Throughout my own research and practice I have begun to develop a process to facilitate this type of learning environment for my students. In this paper, I share my own successes and challenges as I spent the first five days of a semester establishing expectations for facilitating learner autonomy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding how to do something and being able to actually carry it out are two very different things. While I have been teaching professionally for more than eight years now, I have been learning how to do it for decades. While far from perfect, or what my idea of perfect would be, I have some ideas of how to keep practicing and moving toward the elusive, distant goal of being the best teacher that I can be. Just as my students work to learn Spanish, I aim to facilitate that learning for them. Together, we can work and face challenges as my students strive to be better speakers of the language and I strive to be a better teacher of the language. One particular challenge lies in the distinction between knowing *about* Spanish and *being able to speak and understand* Spanish. In the popular television show, *The Big Bang Theory*, one scene finds the four highly educated physicists in a broken-down car on the side of the road. Leonard asks the others, “Does anybody know anything about internal combustion engines?” They all reply in the affirmative, Howard commenting specifically that it is simply, “nineteenth century technology.” When Leonard next asks, “Does anybody know how to fix an internal combustion engine?” no one has a clue. While teachers are inundated with a plethora of new tips, tricks, and theories of learning, the challenge often lies in determining how to apply these to create a better learning experience for the particular students in their classrooms. This paper will describe my experience in implementing a different approach for the first five days of a beginning Spanish course.

## FOUNDATIONS

Teachers must ask questions. In his text, *Why Don't Students Like School*, Daniel T. Willingham (2010) suggested that interest for learning could be sparked by focusing on a driving question in a lesson and guiding students to find answers, rather than providing answers in which the students have no interest. In order to motivate students to learn and engage them with the material, it is best to start by asking questions. In Douglas Adams' beloved science fiction novel, *Hitchhiker's Guide the Galaxy*, the answer to life, the universe, and everything was 42, but the answer meant nothing because the question was unknown. If the goal is to facilitate lifelong language learning, teachers should ask students questions to lead them toward an understanding of their own learning goals.

Researchers in various fields have put forward evidence of a phenomenon that has been dubbed “the ten-year rule” in which it takes

approximately ten years of concerted effort for an individual to master any given ability, from chess to the piano (Brooks, 2011; Colvin, 2008; Gladwell, 2008; Willingham, 2010). Due to the unlikeliness of having a student in a single educational system for this long of a period of time, it would be prudent for teachers to promote self-regulated learning amongst all students. In this way, teachers can enable their students to continue learning and reaching higher levels of mastery with the language. Asking students questions to promote their understanding of how to set language learning goals is the critical first step in the process, described by Dörnyei (2001) in his pre-actional phase and by Zimmerman (2008) in his forethought phase. Teachers should ask students why they want to learn the language, to determine what level of proficiency they seek, and what they want to be able to do with the language, to drive the content they will need to know. While it is true that programs have proficiency and content goals based on the curriculum of existing programs, beginning new classes by asking students what they are interested in can help teachers to make better decisions about the curriculum while showing students they are valued as individuals. Valuing students' learning goals can promote their motivation because self-schema underlies motivation and how teachers help learners to understand themselves is a major part of understanding how teachers can motivate students (Dweck & Molden, 2005). How students understand their abilities in relation to learning goals is very important because if they understand that effort is more important than natural ability, they will see they can set and reach challenging goals (Colvin, 2008; Dörnyei, 2001; Shenk, 2010).

Motivation must become intrinsic to students. They must want to reach these goals because they find value in them. If students are only focused on reaching goals for extrinsic reasons such as grades, they will have no compelling reason to continue learning beyond their current classrooms. Additionally, extrinsic motivations have only been shown to be truly effective when the tasks individuals are asked to complete are menial and probably could be done better by a computer than a person (Pink, 2009). In our language classrooms, intrinsic motivation can be facilitated through student-valued goals. Students can begin to focus on these goals through the NCSSFL-ACTFL Global Can Do Benchmarks ([http://www.actfl.org/global\\_statements](http://www.actfl.org/global_statements)) that break down language goals into simple "Can-Do" statements that are easy for students to understand. These statements are arranged by language proficiency levels, from novice low to distinguished, and by mode of communication: interpersonal, presentational speaking and writing, and interpretive listening and reading. Each overarching statement is supported by a PDF document containing various example

statements. These goals facilitate a starting point from which students start the journey toward lifelong language learning.

Once students have the proficiency and content learning goals that will direct them, they need teachers to guide them toward resources that will facilitate reaching those goals. This is where a focus on task-based language learning comes into play. Rather than having students focused on learning *about* the language, their Can-Do statements direct them instead to focus on what they are *able to do* with the language. This means that conjugating verbs and discussing parts of speech receive less attention than tasks that ask students to create and use language.

In the fall of 2015, rather than handing students a textbook as a single source of language input, I proposed an experiment in which students would work together in teams to create their own online repository of resources. We took the proficiency and content goals and divided those amongst small groups of students. Each team was responsible for finding and curating a set of resources that would help them and their peers reach their language learning goals. Students found materials online: websites, videos, and images. They were encouraged to find authentic resources, as often as was possible and practical to do so. This gave students real world examples of the Spanish language that were current, connected, and ever evolving. These resources enabled students to construct and complete tasks to demonstrate their abilities. For example, students might have the goal, “I can understand simple directions in Spanish.” Students decided how they might represent this knowledge. Perhaps they would partner up with a peer. One partner would give directions in Spanish and film the other following those directions. Then they could switch roles. In this way, students created evidence of their learning. Each student then used this evidence to build a personal learning portfolio. Their portfolios featured their learning goals, evidence of their abilities towards those goals, and reflections on their learning process.

The most important piece of this process of moving students in the direction of self-regulated lifelong language learning is the reflection. Reflecting on their learning strategies and self-assessment of their progress is not something that comes naturally to students. Students have rarely been asked in school what they think about their own progress. If students have gotten mostly As and Bs, they assume they are smart and capable because teachers have told them so. Self-assessment, in contrast, can help students become more aware of their strengths and weakness and help them to set better goals, thereby become more self-

regulated (Brindley, 2001; Tudor, 1996). Because students are not accustomed to self-assessment, they need feedback from their teachers to help them improve their ability to decide how well they are doing (Tudor, 1996). Without training, those who know very little tend to overestimate their abilities because they do not know what they do not know. Those who are quite knowledgeable will, by the same logic, tend to underestimate their abilities.

Some tools are currently available to help guide students in the reflective process. The National Capital Language Resource Center in Washington, DC developed a helpful resource on peer and self-assessment in language learning over a decade ago (<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/assessing/peereval.htm>). It is helpful to keep assessment simple so that students can understand how to assess themselves. Steve Ventura's Fixing Rubrics: How Simplifying Success Criteria Can Increase Achievement ([http://www.steveventura.com/files/sp\\_rubric.pdf](http://www.steveventura.com/files/sp_rubric.pdf)) can be a helpful tool to promote self-assessment. The more this process can be student-directed, and only teacher-facilitated, the more motivation will take that all-important leap from extrinsic to intrinsic that is key for critical thinking and lifelong learning (Pink, 2009).

All along the way, I wanted to explain to students what they were doing and why they were doing it. It helped them to understand the framework that they were working within. Students want to know why they are directed to whatever teachers feel is important to try to get them to learn. Taking the time to explain the importance of the work and how it all fits together really pays off. Students are more motivated when they understand why they are working so hard. Nothing kills off intrinsic motivation quicker than telling a student, "because I said so." If teachers are trying to promote autonomy, students need to buy into the learning goals—teachers' goals must align with students' goals.

## **THE FIRST FIVE DAYS**

The first day of most classes involves going over a syllabus that establishes the expectations of the course. I began by skipping this important and time-honored tradition. Instead, I spent the first day of class focusing discussion on a question: What does fluent mean? Ask students who want to start learning a language what their goal is and they might say that they want to "be fluent." The

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term “fluent” is a hazy concept with as many definitions as there are people who describe it. It never really got at what my students meant when they used it.

On day one, I wanted my students to understand what the ACTFL proficiency levels were so that they could start to understand what they really wanted in regards to studying a language. Creative Language Class has developed a PowerPoint and set of activities to help facilitate a conversation about proficiency in the language classroom (<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Powerpoint-and-Activities-to-explain-a-Proficiency-based-Classroom-298307>). This includes a set of cards that describe what types of language constitute each proficiency level. These cards are used along with a writing prompt to give students the opportunity to explore proficiency in their first language. For example, the Novice Mid card asks students to respond to the writing prompt by describing the situation using only simple phrases and lists and without using any verbs. This activity gives students the experience of various proficiency levels in a language that they already know. To continue to explore samples of proficiency levels, ACTFL has numerous samples in different languages and each mode of communication within each of these languages housed at <http://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/english/speaking>. I wanted my students to interact overtly with these samples and reflect on what made each sample qualify as the level of proficiency listed.

There are various activities that can be used to do this reflection, but writing seems to get at a deeper level of reflection than in-class discussion. Using our course management system, I created a forum in which students were required to point to various samples of proficiency levels and reflect quite explicitly on why they believed the sample was representative. Students then read the posts their peers wrote and responded with feedback. As students started to understand proficiency, they began to plan their learning goals better. Not every student planned to attend graduate school in a Spanish-speaking country and therefore, not every student would aim for a distinguished level of proficiency. It all depended on what they want to do with the language. At this point students could start to explore those NCSSFL-ACTFL Global Can Do Benchmarks ([http://www.actfl.org/global\\_statements](http://www.actfl.org/global_statements)) and start thinking more specifically about where this language-learning journey might lead them.

For the second class, I talked to my students about how learning happens. For this purpose, I used a model of language learning as a journey that I

developed to synthesize research around portfolio learning for my dissertation research. This model involved three key phases that helped students understand what steps they would take: the mapping Phase, the traveling phase, and the unwinding phase. These three phases are arranged in a circle where the unwinding phase ends where the mapping phase begins again.

The mapping phase begins with developing a map to determine where they wanted to go. This was started the day before and would be continued in the next class. For now, it was essential that they were aware of the importance of setting language learning goals to help them understand where to focus their effort. Some of these goals would be proficiency-oriented, like the ones they explored in the previous class. Other goals would be content-oriented, focused on what language functions they needed, and would be the topic of the next class. On day two, it was simply important to point out that they would work collaboratively to create a map to direct their language learning journey. It was important to look over the NCSSFL-ACTFL Global Can Do Benchmarks more closely and talk about how to set good goals (for more information on the mapping phase and additional resources see: <https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/mapping>).

The second step of the model is the traveling phase. This phase involved collecting resources to build the language they needed to communicate and the tasks they would complete in order to demonstrate evidence of reaching the goals from the mapping phase. These tasks focus on using the language communicatively because the purpose of this journey is gaining the *ability to use* the language, rather than simply gaining knowledge *about* the language. This means a focus on speaking, reading, writing, and listening where grammar plays only a supporting role in the drama. Students are engaged with creating evidence of their learning via communicative learning tasks (for more information on the traveling phase and additional resources see: <https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/traveling>).

Finally, the unwinding phase of the model describes how students unwind at various rest stops along their journey to check the map, from the first phase, and self-assess their progress by way of the evidence created in the second phase. They use these two elements of their journey to reflect on the progress they have made. This reflection enables them to continue their journey on the path that will take them where they want to go. Sometimes this unwinding phase is described as making a scrapbook of the journey before reentering the mapping phase to plan the next leg of the journey (for more information on the unwinding

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phase and additional resources see:  
<https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/unwinding>).

On the third day, we focused on content goals, both those established within the given curriculum and those that students created themselves. The curriculum is made up of a sequence of language courses. There were certain grammatical points and vocabulary structures students would need in order to move into the next course in the sequence. To begin this process for my students, we explored the content they needed to be familiar with and the language proficiency levels that were expected of them in order to be prepared for the next course in the sequence (for example: <https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/a-list-of-things-they-need-to-know-before-1020>). After exploring those necessary topics, my students next needed resources to learn about their content and proficiency goals. A Google search of any of these topics brought up various resources. There are numerous resources that most teachers can list off easily, depending on the language they teach. For Spanish, for example, [StudySpanish.com](http://www.studyspanish.com), Dr. Lemon's Grammar Notes (<http://www.drlemon.com/Grammar101.html>), and BBC Spanish (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/>) are three that immediately come to mind. Depending on the age and reading level of students, resources could be limited to a few pre-selected sources or opened up to the expanse of the World Wide Web. If it is appropriate, the latter is preferable. My students had more freedom to connect with the language they were learning in ways that were so much more expansive than the classroom and so much more closely tied to their own interests.

As a result of this process, students in my Fall 2015 class were able to gain a realistic understanding of the language learning possibilities. This understanding was used to start building a course syllabus together that valued what they felt was important. They developed policies to hold each other responsible and push each other forward to learn more. They decided what it meant to be respectful and codified that. They developed an attendance policy based on an understanding of needing each other to be present for everyone to learn. The class belonged to them. They were already taking ownership of their own learning.

On day four, we focused on how to organize and curate this learning. As mentioned previously, in our course, small teams developed resources that served as the "textbook" for the course. This involved a class wiki that was hosted on a Google site (for information on using Google sites, see:

<https://support.google.com/sites/?hl=en#topic=1689606>). The class was divided into various expert jigsaw groups to learn about five different aspects of building this wiki. Jigsaw is a way of learning that involves dividing students into expert and home groups to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge through peer teaching (for more on how I structured these jigsaw groups, see: <https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/jigsaw>). The five expert groups included a design group, a citation group, a words group, a rules group, and a practice group. Each group was assigned a specific function that they needed to learn about, along with a corresponding set of resources to help them. The design group was focused on understanding some basic guidelines of web design. They were given four resource pages to read so they could learn the basic principles for this kind of writing. As many students had never had the opportunity to create a website before, this gave them some key ideas about how to best organize the information they would be curating in a way that would be useful to themselves and others. The citation group was in charge of learning about copyright, fair use, and creative commons, along with how to cite the various resources the class collected. The words group focused on how to best find and evaluate vocabulary in the target language. This involved learning why translation sites were not as helpful as dictionary sites for finding the particular words they wanted to learn. They explored and became familiar with some dictionary sites, one in particular that features native speaker forums where the meanings of words are discussed. They also explored techniques for helping to memorize vocabulary. The rules group focused on various places online they could explore resources on grammar and language use. This group spent quite a bit of time looking at authentic resources on video hosting sites as well. Finally, the practice group focused on various games and online tools to practice everything they were learning. This included learning how to create quizzes with Google Forms and various other sites for online learning activities. (All of the resources used in these groups are featured on <https://sites.google.com/site/fleat2015/toolkit>.) After the “experts” learned what they needed to in their respective groups, new “home groups” were formed, consisting of at least one member from each expert group. As a result, each home group was capable of doing everything they needed to make their class textbook wiki a success.

Finally, the fifth day directed students to answer the question: How do we know what we know? This was the day they created the portfolio that served as their own “notebook” to house their goals, evidence of learning, and reflections on learning. I had constructed a Google site template which facilitated the creation of individual portfolios

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(<https://sites.google.com/a/appstate.edu/my-spanish-portfolio/home>).

Creating the template involved searching for “how to save a Google site as a template” and following the online instructions. Basically, it was important to me to include space for the goals, evidence of learning, and reflections that would constitute the portfolio. Beyond these basic pieces, students were free to customize their portfolios however they wished. This gave space for individual values, identity, and personality. This kind of freedom in design really seemed to promote ownership and intrinsic motivation.

Once the set-up was complete, the day-to-day conduct of this class became more self-regulated as students fell into a regular pattern. Each home group took a turn finding resources to help the entire class learn about each goal in the sequence. Those resources were posted on the class wiki. Each individual student studied those resources before class. Class time was then focused on practicing the language and developing the evidence that demonstrated learning. Those examples, while usually created collaboratively in class, were posted individually to each student’s portfolio. Students reflected on their learning processes and self-assessed the correspondence between their goals and evidence of learning. In this type of classroom environment, my responsibility shifted to monitoring the class wiki to be sure the topics were being covered completely and appropriately and checking-in with students during class to help them as they developed evidence of their learning. I read students’ portfolios and gave them individual feedback on their reflections and self-assessments. After a time, the class became quite self-regulated. The students pushed each other to do more and reach higher goals. By the end of a course sequence, this style of facilitating learning has the potential to give students the tools and training they need to be lifelong language learners.

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