



Voices and Choices:

Engaging French-language learners by encouraging student voice and autonomy



Synopsis

Discover how some educators are increasing engagement in learning French by acting upon student input and nurturing student autonomy. Find out how some students feel when they have choices and know that their ideas are valued.



Before Viewing

Reflecting on current practice

1. In what ways do I develop student autonomy in my class?
 2. What is the connection between strategy use, learner autonomy and student engagement?
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During Viewing

Making connections

1. How do the key messages in the quotes connect with my teaching practices?
 2. What elements of the classroom environments that we see support student autonomy? How do these elements compare with those found in my classroom?
 3. Which of the strategies that the participants mention do I find effective in developing student autonomy?
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After Viewing

Moving forward

1. How might I further support my students in developing metacognitive skills such as setting goals, planning task completion, reflecting on progress and identifying next steps in developing proficiency in French?
2. What additional actions could I implement to encourage my students to independently use a range of effective strategies while speaking, reading, writing and listening to French?
3. How could I increase the choices my students have regarding what they learn in French and which resources they use, as well as how and when they demonstrate their learning?



Going Deeper

Developing student autonomy contributes to increasing engagement in a number of ways. Several participants in this project remarked that students were more productive when they were allowed to make choices, such as deciding what to discuss or write about, or which topics to research. This observation is supported by research findings that indicate students are more engaged when they feel they have some control over their learning (Deci, Ryan, et al.). A number of researchers support the notion that “providing students with choice stimulates natural curiosity and motivation to learn” (Cornelius-White, 2007; Harter, 2012; Lambert and McCombs, 1998; McCombs, 2012; McCombs & Miller, 2007, 2008; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Robinson, 2011, 2013).⁵

Educators promote learner autonomy by valuing student voice. Participants provide frequent opportunities for students to express their ideas, opinions and preferences. Student surveys, exit slips, sharing circles, self-assessments, lesson reflections and discussions with students about personal learning goals are some of the ways in which educators can discover students’ perspectives in order to respond to their needs and interests when planning. Listening attentively to all students, and ensuring that even the less vocal students are heard, is a critical aspect of valuing student voice.

It is important to note that promoting student autonomy does not mean functioning without structure.⁶ Increasing students’ sense of autonomy is accomplished by providing a balance of structure and flexibility. For example, teachers present students with an open-ended task based on a specific learning goal and encourage students to be creative in how they find and present solutions.

⁵ McCombs, Barbara. (2018). *Developing Responsible and Autonomous Learners: A Key to Motivating Students*. American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/learners.aspx>

⁶ Deci, Edward L., Hyungshim Jang and Johnmarshall Reeve. (2010). *Engaging Students in Learning Activities: It Is Not Autonomy Support or Structure but Autonomy Support and Structure*. *Journal of Educational Psychology* <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.887&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

“We know how to collect students’ ideas and opinions; now we need to get better at allowing their voices to guide us and honour the contribution that all students can make to deep meaningful change in education.”

– Cooke & Dunleavy (2010)

“While older students are expected to assume increasing responsibility for their schooling, young children need to be actively taught what it means to be engaged in school.”

– Bureau de l’Éducation et Enseignement supérieur Manitoba (2014)

“J'aime avoir le choix parce que je peux faire quelque chose qui m'intéresse personnellement.”

– Élève du niveau secondaire en immersion

“J'aime avoir les choix parce que je peux montrer mes intérêts.”

– Élève du niveau élémentaire en français de base

Learner autonomy is enhanced when teachers ensure that learning is meaningful, enjoyable and appropriately challenging (neither too challenging nor too easy). This motivates students to embrace learning and complete tasks because they want to, not primarily for incentives such as marks, points, and rewards.

Teaching students a wide range of learning strategies and encouraging them to use those they personally find most effective develops learner autonomy. Students become increasingly aware of their own learning processes and what steps they need to take to achieve their goals.

Students from different French programs and grade levels demonstrated autonomy in assessing their own oral or written productions. They were highly engaged in reflecting on their progress, noting areas for improvement and planning which strategies to use. Teachers provided clear success criteria, templates for tracking personal learning goals, specific and timely feedback, and access to technology for recording and self-assessing oral productions.

Developing the necessary skills to learn independently is also related to long-term French learning engagement. In primary grades, students develop skills that contribute to learner autonomy, such as choosing reading material that is appropriately challenging. As students progress, they learn to take increased responsibility for their learning, for example, they plan steps to strengthen their skills, take initiative to apply and reflect on learning strategies, and independently use reference tools to correct their written productions.

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