# Speaking for Yourself:
# How to Support Students in Autonomous Speaking

## STRYBOL Jan (1), VERSCHELDEN Vanessa (2)

Het Perspectief PCVO, Belgium (1)
Het Perspectief PCVO, Belgium (2)

## Abstract

*In the European project 'Speaking for Yourself', six language institutions from four different countries investigated the question: how can we support teachers to stimulate students to practice speaking on their own? This empowerment of the student to learn autonomously is important for several reasons. Firstly, learning a language requires a lot of practice and the time available in the classroom is not sufficient. Therefore, students need to be able to learn and practice on their own. Secondly, differentiation, especially at higher levels, is a key factor and autonomous learning provides the opportunity to differentiate according to the needs and wants of the student. Thirdly, when students learn to take their learning process in their own hands, they will continue to learn, even after the formal instruction is finished.*

*Seeing the complexity of language learning, we considered it more efficient to focus on one skill. We chose speaking because it is generally considered the most important language skill in terms of usage of the target language, but also the most difficult one to empower the learner for. There are numerous grammar, vocabulary and writing tools to be found on the internet. Reading and listening can be practiced using videos and texts but speaking tools and activities to practice on your own are not widespread, so we wanted to investigate this challenge. As a method of enquiry, we opted for action research: an efficient method to empower teachers and provide them with the ability to support their learners <u>and</u> to take their professional development into their own hands. In this article, we will explain why and how we conducted the action research and describe conditions and suggestions for implementing a similar action research in your own institution.*

**Keywords**: *speaking, autonomous learning;*

## Thinking about the outcome

The research question for our European project was: how can we support teachers to stimulate students to practice speaking on their own? The first idea was to design a ready-to-use toolbox: a collection of instruments and procedures that we tested and improved by using action research. Teachers would then be able to download and use the toolbox in their own schools. However, when performing the action research, we gradually came to realize that the only way for teachers to really become competent in supporting their students is to go through the action research cycle themselves (preferably with colleagues). In other words: the process became the product.
We decided on this shift of focus because we learned that the initial situation (type of students, class size, language level, preference of the teacher, educational culture, etc.) is too much of a determining factor to work with default material. Secondly, it is really important that teachers have a profound understanding of the various challenges and opportunities of coaching autonomous learning. This can only be reached by trying to figure it out yourself with your own students and colleagues. In other words: by doing action research.

## Lowering the threshold

The second question we posed ourselves was: how can we lower the threshold for teachers to go through this action research? We agreed that the best way to do this was a combination of two elements. Firstly, by setting an example and describe the way we performed the action research in our own institutions. This makes the concept of action research more concrete as the examples are embedded in real contexts of practice. Secondly by making the results of our research (questionnaires, screening instruments, activities and materials) available to all interested teachers in a toolbox: http://speaking4yourself.hetperspectief.net/toolbox/. Teachers are free to use our models as

they please: they can copy them and use them as they are, but we strongly believe that it is even better to 'tune' the models to one's own initial situation. This tuning can be done by performing the steps of action research we describe. Our goal of lowering the threshold is achieved because teachers can follow the steps we set out in the description of our action research and they don't have to design their own instruments: they can start from the models we provide.

Before starting our own action research, we needed information on both the context and the theory on autonomous learning.

## Autonomous learning: the context

What is the initial situation concerning autonomous learning in our own schools? In other words: where do depart from? How is autonomous learning perceived by teachers and students? To what extent do teachers support autonomous learning at this point? Do stakeholders want more autonomous learning? We designed questionnaires to find out more about the position of autonomous learning in our home institution. The questionnaire templates and the results of our schools are available on the website: http://speaking4yourself.hetperspectief.net/the-making-of-2/initial-situation-analysis/

## Autonomous learning: the theory

The theory: what is autonomous learning and what role can a teacher play in supporting it? To find out more about this subject, we consulted relevant sources and summarized our findings in a common vision. This starts with a definition of autonomous learning: we think teachers need to be able to support the students toward learner autonomy as defined by Holec [1]: "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". This needs to be done in steps as there is a strong correlation between competence and autonomy: students should be given the level of autonomy proportionate to their level of competence. If students are given too much autonomy too soon, their motivation will drop and vice versa. Teachers need to be able to estimate the level of autonomy they can gradually give to their students.

## Supporting autonomous learning: steps

This gradation of autonomy may be organized according to the following list of decision topics (Holec):
1. fixing the objectives and defining the content and progressions
2. selecting the methods and techniques to be used
3. monitoring the acquisition procedure and evaluating what has been acquired

For each of the above topics, teachers may decide on their own, inform students on the decision or gradually include students more in the decision-making process by giving them options to choose from. Ultimately, they could leave the decision completely up to the learner.

### 1. Fixing the objectives and defining the content and progressions

The teacher makes a **diagnosis** of the student's language learning process. In order to do so, the teacher identifies the **key elements** of the learning process. This diagnosis requires the ability to:
- design tasks that are suited for diagnostic testing
- identify -from the different tasks- the key elements of the different subskills
- analyse the feasibility, difficulty and importance of the diagnosed elements
- define the learning objectives and their timing accordingly

The teacher gives **efficient feedback** to their students in such a way that
- the student feels the feedback is clear, precise and adapted to their own needs and learning style
- the student feels motivated and stimulated to work on their learning process

### 2. Selecting the methods and techniques to be used

In order to **support and coach the student** in this step, the teacher needs to:

- be familiar with a variety of methods and techniques to learn autonomously
- suggest and explain efficient methods and techniques for different skills or underlying knowledge
- motivate the learner to make choices and to start the learning
- support the learner in the first learning steps

### 3. Monitoring the acquisition procedure and evaluating what has been acquired

In order to **support and coach** the student in the monitoring and evaluation of the progressions, the teacher needs to:
- give efficient feedback on the progressions of the student
- visualise the progressions
- intervene when necessary
- motivate the student to continue
- gradate the autonomy according to the growing competence of the learner

The tasks described in the steps above are complex and difficult: teachers will need instruments and procedures to be able to perform them. As we described at the beginning, however, our view is that teachers can't just copy the instruments and procedures: they need to gain insight and acquire skills to use them in their own educational environment. This acquisition is best achieved by performing action research, as we have done in our own institutions.

## Action research

Action research is an organized method to find solutions to practical challenges. It is also an effective way to co-operate with the colleagues to improve shared teaching practice because it gives feedback on your work and provides you with a new perspective. More technically speaking, it is an intentional and planned study of one's own teaching practice, with the primary objective of improving that practice. The difference between action research and academic research is:
- Action research has a focus on improving one's own practice. It is research conducted by the teacher. It is therefore personal, context oriented, unique and small-scale.
- With academic research, the focus is rather on theory building: others can use the theory in their practice.

Action research generally follows a cycle [2]:

**Step 1 - Problem Identification**:
- Why do you want to do study this topic?
- Is the problem broad enough to allow for a range of insights and findings? Is it narrow enough to be manageable?

**Step 2 - Plan of Action**
- Will you develop and implement a new strategy or approach to address your question?
- What data do you need to learn about your question?

**Step 3 - Data Collection**
- What, why, when, where, and how will you collect your data?
- How will you ensure that you have multiple perspectives?

**Step 4 - Analysis of Data**
- What can you learn from the data?
- What patterns, insights, and new understandings can you find?

**Step 5 - Plan for Future Action**
- What will you do differently in your classroom as a result of this study?
- How will you write about what you have learned so that the findings will be useful to you and to others?

## Our action researches

In our project, we performed two action researches that serve as a model for interested teachers.

Action research 1 investigated the specific **research question** was: what is the most effective way to inform my students on the speaking skills they need to practice more? We designed screening instruments for the diagnostic testing of speaking skills, which we tried out during the action research. The report on our website provides a detailed account of the experiences we had with our first action research: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_amaWKvBqXSSFJBS2Rjd0VFNHM/view

It contains suggestions on how to use the templates pragmatically in various teaching situations and reports on the impressions of students and teachers.

Action Research 2 focused on the research question: how can I motivate and empower my students to practice speaking autonomously? The report on the project website describes our experience and results concerning this research question:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_amaWKvBqXSRlhLNVE1aXVEYzA/view

## Conclusion

In this article, we described the rationale, process and products of the European project Speaking for Yourself. The project participants decided to use action research as a method to find an answer to the starting question: how can we support teachers to stimulate students to practice speaking on their own? By doing so, we developed instruments, materials and autonomous learning activities applicable to our own educational environments. However, we also came to realize that it is not just those concrete outcomes that will help other teachers to support autonomous learning. Rather, it is the process of going through an action research as we have done. In other words, the process became the product and that is what we shared on our website: http://speaking4yourself.hetperspectief.net/

## References

[1]   Holec, Henri "Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning", Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981
[2]   Midwest Brain and Learning Institute: https://hope.edu/brain/Institute%204/actionresearch.pdf