How my students show me what independent thinking looks like in my classroom

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> Student: How is 'he was buying cats and selling dogs' an example of parallelism?
> Teacher: Well, like we discussed before, it repeats the grammatical structure.
> Student: What do you mean?
> Teacher: Have a look at the sentence – after the auxiliary verb, there are two verb phrases, both with a present participle verb and a pluralised noun phrase.
> Student: I can sort of understand what you're saying, but there's no way I can analyse like that.
> Teacher: You mean, you can't analyse like that **yet**.
> Student: No, I mean I can't **think** like that.

Developing **independent thinking skills** in students is a meaningful challenge. I teach senior English and English Language at an independent school for girls in Melbourne, and the brief conversation above took place in one of my Year 12 English Language classes[i]. The student is reasonably hard-working and engaged, and is achieving good results, but she doubts her ability to think independently and analytically. The example above relates to a lower-order thinking skill, of analysing syntactic structure, yet reluctance to engage fully with the thinking is relatively wide-spread. Nonetheless, her willingness to articulate her confusion and to challenge me further is positive, and suggests possibilities for further development of independent thinking. This subject is quite intellectually stimulating and challenging, so at times students want the teacher to explain all the main concepts in detail, so that they can internalise the key points in preparation for assessment tasks and the end-of-year exam. The problem, as I see it, is that even when students are good at playing what Eliot Eisner calls 'the game of point-accumulation', their **ability to transfer the key ideas** is limited, and they depend too much on the teacher delivering the material. This does not prepare them well for university studies or for life in general. With what we now know about the need for life-long learning, and the requirements in professional and civic life for creative, independent, and resilient thinking, it

seems such skills need to be consciously and deliberately taught and developed in class; however, I also believe that my students are already capable of demonstrating such deeper thinking skills at times. Therefore, my goal with this project will be to identify how students show me what independent thinking looks like in my classroom. Then, it will be easier for me to continue stimulating such thinking in the future.

In addition, I believe that some of the challenges we have with students' attitudes to their thinking and learning are related to their mindsets. I have been inspired by reading Carol Dweck's book *Mindsets* (2007) to change some of the ways in which I speak to students about their learning. Now, I focus on providing feedback that comments on the effort students have put into their tasks, and that validates the application of time, energy and concentration, rather than simply praising 'inherent' abilities. So, I will be aiming to **reinforce** what Dweck calls **a *growth mindset*** while challenging students' *fixed mindsets* throughout the process.

Furthermore, I will consider the role of **feedback** in developing a growth mindset and more independent thinking skills. Contemporary research into factors that influence learning has clearly indicated the significance of high-quality feedback. One of the questions I plan to consider relates to the role of feedback in developing strong and independent thinking skills.

Context: Active learning with high-performing students

This year, the curriculum theme at my school is 'Taking Notice', which includes a strong focus on differentiation and personalised learning, as well as a need to develop students into more active learners. With other department heads, I have read and discussed Guy Claxton's book *Building the Learning Powered School* (2011) in some depth and detail, and these discussions have inspired me to focus more on how to achieve some of these goals. The culture of learning and improvement in the group is positive and inspiring, and in some ways it models the sort of learning community that we would like to develop in the classroom. My reading and research in this field have given me some ideas and tools concerning how such goals could potentially be met. Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky's discussion of a 'zone of proximal development' seems to me pregnant with possibilities; according to him, "the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development" (89). In other words, real learning will only

happen when students are challenged to move beyond the level of understanding they have currently reached. So, I am looking for ways to **stimulate and develop thinking skills** that students can bring to other areas of life outside of the English Language classroom, and I want them to push their thinking forward, and develop new ideas throughout their learning process. I also want to make such processes of thinking and exploring key ideas something that forms part of their repertoire of intellectual skills, their independence and academic resilience. After having become more familiar in the past few years with Ron Ritchhart's work on how to make thinking visible, I decide to focus on the use of the *Microlab* conversational protocol[ii], as a way of helping students develop and express some of these core thinking skills. In addition, I will aim to use a range of tools to **promote independent learning and thinking**, including a variety of formative assessment strategies (mostly from Dylan Wiliam's book *Embedded Formative Assessment*, 2011).

Stage one: Using the Microlab protocol

The specific task that I will focus on is related to Unit 3 of VCE English Language. Area of Study 1 is related to informal language, and its nature and functions in contemporary Australian society. The core ideas here are relatively complex, and I am hoping to elicit some evidence of how my students are thinking independently, and then to use this to help students to construct an understanding more independently in the future. My first attempt at using the Microlab protocol will involve the teaching of a potentially complex part of the study design, where students need to understand 'how informal language can be used to reinforce in-group membership'. This suggests that slang, idioms and various other informal language features may be used in groups as a way of signalling to other group members that we share the values, cultural background and interests of the group. As these ideas need to be firmly understood, they cannot simply be taught by me lecturing students from the front of the room, but must be made meaningful through discussion and challenging classroom activities that build on students' prior learning and understanding. In other words, this should be an ideal area to explore with conversational protocol.

I begin my attempt to engage students by telling an anecdote about Prime Minister Julia Gillard using an informal expression in a press conference ("the

Australian people have had a gutful of this"). I link this to our previous discussion of how informal language may be used to reinforce solidarity and equality. I then clarify the learning intentions of today's lesson, and briefly establish prior knowledge through the use of a quick activity using the mini-whiteboards that are now available in most of our classrooms. With each student using a mini-whiteboard, I can ask questions such as 'what semantic feature is *to have a gutful of something*?' and 'what morphological feature is evident in the lexeme *randomness*?' As students write down their answer for each question on the mini-whiteboard and hold it up, I can quickly scan the room and see what they already know, and what they are still struggling with. This allows me to fine-tune my instruction and adapt my classroom activities to their specific needs and abilities.

After a short explanation (five minutes) from me in relation to different functions of informal language use, I introduce an article for today's discussion. It is a relatively conversational column from *The Age* by Sian Prior, about her use of slang as an adolescent in England in the eighties. While we read the article together, students underline and highlight key ideas and examples in the text. I then introduce three different tasks: to summarise her argument; to evaluate, challenge or critique her argument; and to extend it further into other areas or fields, with other examples. I write these on the whiteboard, then ask students in groups of three to choose which one each group member will focus on. Once decided, they are given five minutes to prepare individually in silence.

We begin with person one summing up the argument to her two peers, who are not allowed to ask any questions or interrupt during these two minutes. I then stop them, and give them one minute to reflect and if they wish to, write down the key points they heard. This is repeated twice, with students challenging and extending the argument respectively. One student asks me, "Why are we doing this?" and I explain that I want to hear everyone engaging with the argument. The conversations hum along and I notice students following the protocol very willingly, not interrupting each other but listening attentively. The most interesting ideas seem to emerge from the second speakers, one of whom observes that "the main weakness here is that this happened twenty years ago in England, and now, here in Melbourne, I think we're more inclusive in our use of language". One of the third speakers mentions that "it could be the same for people who work as lawyers or doctors, even though that's more formal".

The advantages of using this protocol are immediately obvious: two or three students who have said very little so far this year have now spoken uninterrupted for a few minutes about fairly complex ideas. Meanwhile, highly vocal and opinionated students have listened to others for at least four minutes, and this structure ideally allows them to reflect on some of what they have heard. All students have needed to engage with key ideas and concepts, not simply listen to me speaking and then regurgitate the key points back in an essay. Yet I feel frustrated by some students fading into silence during their two minutes, claiming that "I have already finished; there is nothing else to say". I realise that one problem is the original article itself, which was engaging and colourful, yet lacked sufficient intellectual depth to fuel their discussion for very long. Thus, students have taught me that I need to provide more intellectually challenging texts for use in class. Vygotsky's point comes to mind, and I decide that future attempts will need to involve more complex material. I also think it might be useful to students if they can see examples or models of people discussing such ideas in depth.

Stage two: A more challenging use of the Microlab protocol

A week after the first use of the protocol, I talk with two colleagues about another area of the study design: how informal language may reinforce intimacy, solidarity and equality. We have decided to argue for one of these key concepts each – so I argue that informal language reinforces equality. The conversation is recorded as a podcast and posted on the class wiki. For homework, students download and listen to it, and take notes in the form of a mind-map. We follow up together in class. I am aiming to model how one may go about thinking about linguistic ideas, and to stimulate their discussions. (Students are subsequently given a task in pairs to record and podcast a discussion on their allocated idea from the study design.). For the past few years, I have used podcasts as a way of allowing students to take control of their own learning; students download the podcasts and listen to them at their leisure. Some stop, take notes, re-wind, listen to it several times, and use the podcasts as they see fit, in order to maximise their own learning. This use of a *flipped classroom structure*, with the explicit instruction component taking place outside of class, appeals to me as it allows more time in class to be spent on discussions, analysis and collaborative learning[iii].

I return to the protocol a week later. This time, I have pre-recorded a podcast on formal language and its use to 'clarify, manipulate and obfuscate'. Students have listened to it at home and taken notes on key concepts. As a hook, I have asked a young colleague give an example of formal language use from her VIT portfolio. We briefly discuss its features and team-teach central aspects of formal language use. I then give students a handout: a question from the producers of ABC's *Four Corners* to the Australian Defence Force (ADF) concerning civilian casualties in Afghanistan. We read and highlight together. For the Microlab: person one will argue that this response aims to clarify; person two – it aims to manipulate; person three – it aims to obfuscate. In other words, they will be solely in charge of generating the key arguments, as the text itself simply acts as an object of study.

This time, the Microlab protocol is more effective, as students have enough to say in the two minutes that some of them are reluctant to stop, and wish to finish making their points. Once the protocol is finished, I give each group a chance to decide as a group on what the purpose of the text actually was – did the ADF aim to clarify, manipulate or obfuscate the truth? We take a class vote and 'manipulate' wins. I then provide an essay topic for practice essay writing: 'While formal language can be used to clarify, it can also be used to manipulate the public and obfuscate the truth.' Students brainstorm an essay plan in pairs for 4 minutes, then we sum up together. Finally, I ask students to write one of their three main paragraphs in the 14 minutes remaining of the lesson. They submit their paragraphs at the end of the lesson.

Stage three: Evidence of learning – where to from here?

Here is an extract from one student's practice paragraph from this lesson:

> The television program "Today Tonight" often integrates
> dyphemisms such as "invasion" and "exposed" in their reports
> in order to create excessive fear and alarm amongst viewers.
> This is evident in a recent report on the introduction of new
> foreign owned discount stores to Australia, labelling them as a
> "foreign discount invasion". Likewise, in a news report claiming
> "A couple had to flee their home in terror after a gang of 20
> thugs laid siege to the property", the dyphemism "siege" has

been purposely utilised to intensify the severity of the situation as "sieges" generally correlate to military blockades with the intent of conquering by assault. This can often falsify a situation and alter the public's opinion on factual occurrences.

As these examples from *Today Tonight* have not been discussed in class, and were not part of any material I have supplied, they show that this student has most likely researched the topic outside class. More importantly, she has demonstrated an ability to transfer some key ideas from one area to another, all of which indicate the student's willingness to reason and compare independently. In other words, this student is clearly showing me what independent thinking can look like in my classroom. In addition, she seems to have understood the key ideas very well, and I want to praise her for that. In relation to feedback, John Hattie argues, in his most recent book, *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2011), that praise is 'counter-productive' as part of feedback, and that it lessens the impact of the formative feedback. For me, this is a hard lesson to learn; I feel that it is important to praise what students have done well, but I am trying to use Hattie's suggestion of warm, verbal praise ('You worked hard on this and I can see that your analytical skills have improved' – growth mindset feedback), and written, formative feedback: 'You need to show a stronger understanding of how the context influences language choices. Also, you could have commented on semantics in your discussion of the lexeme "siege".'

On the other hand, here is an extract from another student's practice paragraph from the same lesson:

> There are many ways to obfuscate in an article, but the most effective one seems to be to completely ignore the topic. For example, if a question relates to an amount of people killed in a war, an effective way of obfuscating would be to say something vague, like 'Pertaining to the overall number of casualties...' or 'The total number of operations over the past few months is high.' and then walk away from the question. Obfuscation, by definition, involves willingly hiding the intended meaning of an article, or making a document confusing or hard to interpret. This is most often done by making it ambiguous.

This student seems to have grasped some of the key concepts, but her discussion is more conversational and less precise. She has used the ADF response as the basis for her discussion, but she is not analysing it very well. The feedback I provide to her will focus on how to use the metalanguage and the analytical tools of the subject more effectively to support her key arguments. As I return the paragraph to her with a few, clearly worded suggestions for how to improve (and no written praise), I tell her: 'I think this shows a lot of improvement, and I'm pleased you've made an effort to think about the key ideas, but in my written feedback I'm just focusing on the things you can improve further.' She seems fine with this, and I will continue monitoring her progress for signs of improvement. In her written work so far, there is less evidence of independent thinking and critical exploration of the material studied; hence, I am able to draw some conclusions about what independent thinking looks like in my classroom.

The Microlab protocol has helped to elicit some examples of independent learning and thinking from each student, and this will help in my attempt to develop a culture of active learning in my classroom. One problem that has emerged is the lack of control that happens by necessity when the protocol begins. As a teacher, I have found it difficult at times to listen in on enough of each student's contribution to establish whether or not their thinking is evolving as planned or expected. For that reason, it seems important to follow up the protocol with another task that elicits further evidence of their thinking. The practice paragraphs were useful, but it would be advantageous to have alternative ways of quickly seeking feedback on their learning. For further exploration, I will continue using some of the protocols that I have found useful, including the Microlab protocol and the Chalk Talk protocol, both of which can clearly be highly successful in forcing students to engage with the material studied and to produce evidence of learning. I also like the fact that these protocols create an opportunity for students to learn from other students' ideas and examples, not just from my instruction as a teacher.

Next step: Chalk Talk and making thinking visible

While the Microlab protocol worked well in making students more accountable and engaged with the key ideas of the study, I want to make some of their thinking more visible. I also wish to make the evidence of students' learning

explicit, thus allowing students to learn how to use each other's ideas to develop their own understanding of the key material. I decide to use the Chalk Talk protocol,[iv] which requires students in groups to articulate their thoughts, questions, comments and ideas in response to a topic on a large poster. This records the gradual development of their collective ideas. More importantly, it may show me more clearly and explicitly what independent thinking looks like in my classroom. To solve the problem of not being able to ascertain how much each student contributes to each topic, I invite a group of three colleagues to observe my class. I ask these three teachers to sit close to each of my groups in class, so that they can listen and observe how well these students are engaging with the task and contributing to the group effort.

I begin by articulating the learning intentions for today. I explain some of the key material in relation to ethnolects (ethnic varieties of English in which a speaker's first language influences their second language use). We watch a short scene from the SBS series *Food Safari,* in which a Korean housewife in Sydney explains how to cook *bibimbap*. Students have been asked to pay attention to different subsystems while we watch the video, so after some time to collate notes, each group reports back on their area of focus.

As I explain the Chalk Talk protocol, I highlight its purpose and emphasise that effective learning includes considering a range of ideas, expressing and articulating thoughts and questions that emerge, and listening and responding to other people's point of view. As usual in this class, students have organised their desks into clusters of four in order to work more productively as a group. Now, each group receives an A3 size poster, and a different topic for each group. This time, topics relate to the role of ethnolects in society. Together, we have skimmed an extract from Bruce Moore's book *Speaking our Language*, focusing on the functions of ethnolects in Lebanese communities in NSW and in Greek and Jewish communities in Melbourne. The topics I supply to each group challenges them to think about the roles of such dialects in society.

During the protocol, each group of students will respond to their topic for four minutes, writing write comments, questions, examples and ideas on their poster. Once finished, their group moves on to the next poster in order to engage with those ideas and comments over the next four minutes. This is then repeated with the other posters and topics. Finally, all students return to their original posters and read through the comments and ideas. I give them pins to put their posters

on the wall. Students circle the room to look at the posters, then choose one topic to respond to in a practice essay. They brainstorm an essay structure in response to that topic, then write the essay for homework over the rest of the week.

The feedback from the observing teachers is very helpful and productive. They discuss with me how well the different students and groups have engaged with each topic, and how collaborative each group was when analysing the Korean woman's speech. Most groups have worked effectively and productively, producing clear evidence of their thinking. One group has been driven more by some of its group members, with two students in particular opting out of the protocol at times. This is a concern, and I need to continue working on how to make sure that all students are fully engaged.

For me, the most exciting evidence of what independent thinking looks like in the Chalk Talk posters was seen in the smaller arrows indicating that a student is responding to another student's question or comment. These small reflections seem to suggest that the intellectual exploration of ideas in the silent conversational protocol has moved beyond a response to the topic I provided, into a more independent exploration of ideas emerging from the students themselves.

Conclusion: Evidence of learning

As my students prepare for their next assessment task, an essay on the use of formal and informal language to create an identity, I seek to evaluate what the students have demonstrated to me about what independent thinking looks like. In reading their practice essays, I look for examples of students transferring ideas from one area of study to another. I also look for evidence of independent research into the ideas explored in class. One student writes in her essay about the use of formal language to avoid social taboos:

> Through maintaining an awareness of the general public's refined sensibilities, particularly those of an older generation who may be more conservative and sensitive to taboo topics, the Australian media often downplays the impact of taboo topics. Recently, on ABC's Q&A program, feminist Germaine Greer casually and provocatively commented on Prime

Minister Julia Gillard's 'big arse'. In a private, informal context, this would seem fairly harmless, but due to it being broadcast live on television, her comment inciting public debate and outrage. However, the media response referred to this delicate topic using the French borrowing 'derriere' or the periphrastic noun 'backside' in order to sound less crude and more tasteful, thus avoiding harming the sensibilities of readers.

This seems to exemplify what independent thinking and learning can look like in my subject. This student has carefully considered some of the key ideas explored in class, and then independently found an example of how the media might euphemise an example of taboo language in reporting Greer's comment. (Later, I ask this student for permission to use her essay as a model with other students to show them what a successful exploration of a topic may look like, and also to model independent thinking in the subject.) As I read through the range of practice essays that students have written in preparation for this assessment task, I see a range of examples of such independent thinking and research. Not all students are willing or able to learn in this way yet; however, my focus on this project in this class has provided me with a much clearer sense of what independent thinking looks like in my classroom, and how students may show evidence of their ability to think, study and learn independently.

Case study questions to consider for further discussion:

1. What were the key moments in this teacher's search for evidence of independent thinking in his subject?
2. What key values underpin this project and this teacher's view of learning?
3. What elements in this case study connect with your own view of independent thinking in your subject?
4. Are there any aspects of this case study that extend or challenge your own professional practice? Why?

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[i] VCE English Language is an academic, linguistics-based subject in the Victorian senior school years curriculum. Students can choose this subject as an alternative to mainstream English; however, as it is a more specialised subject, it contains a heavier focus on language analysis and discussion.

[ii] For an explanation of how the Microlab protocol works, see www.pzweb.harvard.edu/vt

[iii] An explanation of how the flipped classroom works, and how it may influence learning, can be found on www.flippedclassroom.com – a site run by Jerry Overmyer, Mathematics and Science Outreach Coordinator from the University of Northern Colorado.

[iv] For a detailed explanation of how this protocol works, please see www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol