



Action plans

Monika Gedicke *gets better results when her students take action.*

Learner responsibility and learner autonomy as parts of learner training have generally been acknowledged as very important for effective teaching and learning. Yet the learning context of a secondary state school sometimes makes it difficult to implement these ideas. Some of my students do come to class fully enthusiastic about the English language and the people who speak it, even willing to do additional work beyond the three or four lessons a week we have at school. Many, however, start learning English for extrinsic motivation only - if for any at all, English is a compulsory part of the school syllabus and they need their final examination for their further professional career.

My experience as a teacher, and as a parent, of secondary school students in Germany leads me to believe that the students' own organisation of their learning process is somewhat ineffective, leading to poor results and demotivation. Especially when it comes to preparing for examinations, students often do not know where to start or how to plan the time they have got. The most common approach seems to be a combination of panic and hope. Others go around with a 'bad conscience' for weeks before an exam, because no matter how much they study and revise, they still feel they should do more. Parents put additional pressures on them and whole families can suffer from constant 'school stress' symptoms.

Individualised study schemes

I have implemented the idea of 'action plans' with my students - precise, individual study schemes which detail what to do for practice and/or revision, and when and how to do it.

My aims are to help students:

- organise their learning throughout a term or school year and to prepare for specific class tests or exams

- become more independent and more efficient in their learning
- gain confidence and be realistic about what can be achieved
- get the feeling of having done something, 'enough' for the time being.

In addition, I hope to relieve parents of the need to push their children to work.

Different levels, different plans

With my 12-year-old beginners, I introduce action plans for the first time as preparation for a class test. They each write 'My personal revision plan for our class test on, and sign it as a kind of contract.

Older students get used to more long-term action plans. For example, my advanced students (17 and older) devise precise action plans for the next three months at the beginning of term.

We start with a discussion of the various ways students can help themselves to improve, eg by reading books, watching films, individual grammar and vocabulary revision, etc, and by looking at suitable material. They then each write down what they think they personally can do - including aspects beyond the work we do in class. They keep one copy of their plans and hand one in to me.

The action plans for older students are set in the frame of a general introduction to, and work on, learning styles and strategies. But even with younger learners they are accompanied by (less sophisticated) exploration of effective learning strategies, starting with vocabulary and grammar, and later moving to skills training as well.

In order to make action plans successful I ask students to

- be as precise as possible
- be realistic about their specific level and personal



REVISION

This is absolute necessary to do for the next class test:

- revision of grammar unit

This is what you can also do to get a good grade:

- revision of coursebook exercise numbers
- revision of workbook exercise numbers
- revision of vocabulary unit

Write down what you plan to do.

Tick off each step as you complete it.

My personal revision plan for our class test on

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday *Relax and do something nice!*

- I will work on my own.
- I will work together with
- I will ask for help.
- I promise to try to keep to his plan.

.....
 (Signature) (Date)

Sample worksheet for lower intermediate students

situation (eg work for other subjects, family obligations, regular free time activities, etc)

- include a clear indication of time
- promise to report on the results to the teacher and/or to fellow students I introduce students gradually to the idea of action plans. We start with a straightforward target, such as the preparation for one class test, and build up to larger 'projects', such as long term action plans which include some out-of-class activities.

We spend some time discussing in class how successful the students have found their action plans. Before older students write their plan for the next three months, they write an individual report to me about the first three months, explaining how they have coped or why they have not managed to keep to their plans. Since students will also have had their first test results returned and been able to talk to me individually about their next steps for improvement, subsequent plans are usually much more realistic and precise.



ACTION PLAN

Write a personal action plan for your work during the next three months. Give one copy to your teacher. Keep your copy in your folder as a constant reminder till we talk about it again on

1. Note down three or more aspects from the last course that you personally want to keep in mind this terms.

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.....
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2. Write down three strenghts you have as a learner and three weaknesses.

Strengths

Weaknesses

.....
.....
.....

3. Decide on some very specific areas of languages you want to improve.

- vocabulary
- grammar
- reading
- speaking
- listening
- writing

4. Write some of the things you are going to do to improve these languages areas, eg participation in class, do set homework, English study at home (reading, watching TV, listening to the radio, writing to English speaking people, etc).

Be very precise and realistic about when and how you want to do this, eg
• *I want to improve my knowledge of vocabulary by learning/revising the following areas in the coursebook, two pages each week.*

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.....
.....

Sample worksheet for advanced students

Feedback

As with everything we do in our teaching, individual action plans appeal to many students, but not all. Some students complain about this 'blackmail' and 'manipulation', but others are very serious about it,

and quite a few parents have expressed the view that this should be done in all subjects. In a general feedback lesson, I asked one group of advanced students to discuss in small groups advantages and disadvantages of this activity, and these are some of the comments they came up with:



- ✓ *An action plan makes you think about things you can do to improve your English.*
- ✓ *You have a plan which you want to fulfil; without this plan some people wouldn't do anything.*
- ✗ *You feel under pressure and might not be willing to learn or study if you think you have to.*
- ✓ *It helps you remember things; when you see a list with all actions three times a week, you're unable to forget it.*
- ✗ *Your expectations might be too high.*
- ✓ *You have a good feeling when you have done something.*
- ✗ *You have feelings of guilt when you don't have time for your plan.*
- ✓ *You see successful results, and you get motivated*
- ✓ *You feel responsible.*

Whatever else, the work we had done led to a very

vivid class discussion. And with regard to those students who didn't really follow their plans and didn't report back properly, maybe what Adrian Underhill said in a talk (IATEFL Poland, November 1995) about feedback questions in the classroom is relevant to action plans too: *Even if students don't answer, the question itself educates.*

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