


<b>Promoting Learner Autonomy in Pre-service Teacher Education</b>			<b>Linguistics</b>
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<b>Abstract</b>			
<p>This paper aims to deal with ways of how to promote learner autonomy among student-teachers, during their passive and active teaching practice through keeping and enriching their portfolios under the model of EPOSTL (European Portfolio of Student Teachers of Languages), bearing in mind that pre-service teacher education needs serious attention of the whole society and especially of the universities preparing teachers. This paper also aims at answering the following questions: What is student-teachers’ perception of learner autonomy? What are the differences and commonalities between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy? Does autonomy move the focus from teaching to learning? How can EPOSTL promote learner autonomy? Having autonomy in mind, how does EPOSTL make use of self and peer assessment? How does learner autonomy encourage peer support and cooperation? What is the relation between learner autonomy to problem solving and reflective teaching/learning? Does learner autonomy depend on teacher autonomy? How to put some milestones for promoting learner autonomy among student-teachers? The answers to these questions are carefully gathered and analyzed and interpreted through interviews and questionnaires on these issues. So, with this study it is aimed to put some milestones for promoting learner autonomy among student-teachers, who will be in the near future teachers of English, trying to focus on learner involvement, learner reflection and learner language acquisition, and how all these might be implemented in practice, thus combining both learner autonomy with teacher autonomy as the student-teachers need to have both of them.</p>			

### What is learner autonomy?

Learner Autonomy has been a buzz word in foreign language learning for a long time. It has transformed old teaching and learning methods in the language classroom and has brought to attention self-language learning methods. As the result of such practices, language teaching is now seen as language learning and it has placed the student at the center of our attention in language learning, thus giving a lot of priorities to student-centered methods of teaching.

The term "learner autonomy" was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, considered the "father" of learner autonomy, though this concept was mentioned for the first time by John Dewey in 1966. Since then a lot of scholars have discussed and debated about the concept ‘learner autonomy’, among which we can mention: Henri Holec, Leni Dam, Phil Benson, Barbara Sinclair, David Little, etc.

Many definitions have since then been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context, and the level of debates teachers and scholars have come to. We’ll concentrate mostly in the pedagogic concept of learner autonomy. Some of the most well-known definitions in present literature are:

- ‘Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning’ (Henri Holec, 1979, cited in Benson &Voller, 1997)
- ‘Learner autonomy is a *capacity* for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action’ (Little 1991)
- ‘Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions’. (Leslie Dickinson, 1992)
- ‘Learner autonomy is the *capacity* to take control of one’s learning as one that established a space in which differences of emphasis can co-exist’. (Benson, 2001)

Some of these definitions are gathered by Theresa Summer in her article: Key Concepts: Learner Autonomy (Summer, 2011).Having a look at the above definitions, we notice that ‘learner autonomy’ is not a

narrow concept, including only a specific knowledge the learner possesses, but it is much more a wider concept, *a capacity*, that enhances and promotes the learner to direct and expand his/her own learning.

Studying the insights of the work of David Little on learner autonomy, who stresses that “Learners take their first step towards learner autonomy when they recognize that they are responsible for their own learning ... and they exercise this responsibility through their involvement in all aspects of learning process, planning, implementing, evaluating ... (Little, 2004); we have come to the conclusion that it is very important to study the perception of student-teachers of learner autonomy; what they understand with this term; how it can move the focus from teaching to learning and from theory to practice. Without understanding the process of learner autonomy, student-teachers cannot develop it. That is why that some of the questions in the questionnaire conducted with student-teachers were about these issues. Promoting learner autonomy among student-teachers is vitally important. Learner autonomy is not a method in itself, it is a process, a capacity ...

One of the key aspects to consider in defining learner autonomy is whether we view it as a *means to an end* (learning a foreign language) or *as an end in itself* (making people autonomous learners). These two options do not exclude each other, both of them can be part of our views towards language learning.

Principles of learner autonomy as defined by Frank Lacey (2007) are:

- Autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning.
- Autonomy affords maximum possible influence to the learners.
- Autonomy means making use of self/peer assessment.
- Autonomy requires and ensures 100% differentiation.
- Autonomy ... a tool of reflection.
- The role of the teacher as supporting scaffolding and creating room for the development of autonomy is very demanding and very important...

### **What is teacher autonomy?**

Crucially, autonomy is primarily concerned with learning rather than teaching. Its development is considered as a cooperative learning. Teacher and learner autonomy are inseparable, if teachers stop teaching, the learners will stop learning. Learner autonomy has to do mostly with student-centered methods. Learn on your own, plan on your own, reflect on your own, but all these cannot be successful without interaction.

It has been said that teaching is nothing more than showing someone that something is possible, and learning is merely discovering that something is possible. Training student-teachers in learning how to learn, is very important, as Trim reminds us: "No school, or even university, can provide its students with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives. It is more important for a young person ... to have learned how to think and how to learn" (Trim, 1988).

At the same time we agree with Fran Lacey (2007), who stresses the idea that “The students have responsibility for their learning but through scaffolding, the teacher takes more responsibility than in a traditional class” (Lacey, 2007). This shows the change of the teacher’s role in today’s classes. But at the same time we should be careful, because “If we are serious with learner autonomy, we must be equally serious about its mirror image, teacher autonomy...” (Little, 2004)

### **What is European Portfolio for Student-Teachers? (EPOSTL)**

EPOSTL is a very important document and a reflection tool, which encourages student-teachers to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to become good language teachers. It plays an important role in promoting student-teachers' learner autonomy through self-assessing their pedagogical competences and enabling them to monitor their progress. While using EPOSTL students can also record their teaching experiences while they have their observation classes or teaching practice. Since its publication the EPOSTL has been widely used at universities and teacher education institutions throughout Europe. EPOSTL is implemented in initial teacher education, teaching practice and in-service teacher development. In the meantime, interest in the EPOSTL is growing beyond the borders of Europe. It has been translated into 14 languages, including Arabic and Japanese and APOSTL is its American version.

The main aims of EPOSTL are:

- To encourage reflection
- To prepare student-teachers for the future profession
- To promote discussion among teachers, mentors and student-teachers
- To facilitate self-assessment
- To monitor and record progress

EPOSTL is the property of student-teachers and it is incorporated into theoretical and practical courses.

It contains these sections:

- The *personal statement section*, helping students reflect on aspects related to teaching
- The *self-assessment section* is at the heart of EPOSTL,
- a dossier,
- a glossary,
- an index
- a users' guide.

The study will focus on the personal statement and self-assessment sections. Both of them emphasize reflection, and mainly promote learner autonomy.

### **How can EPOSTL promote learner autonomy**

EPOSTL is a tool to promote professional growth through reflection and dialogue. As such, it is seen as a means of enhancing autonomous learning' (EPOSTL, 2007). This doesn't mean that the teacher's role is abandoned, the teacher guides the whole process by giving instructions about 'when' and 'how' to use EPOSTL. EPOSTL is divided in 7 categories based on different aspects of teaching and learning process.

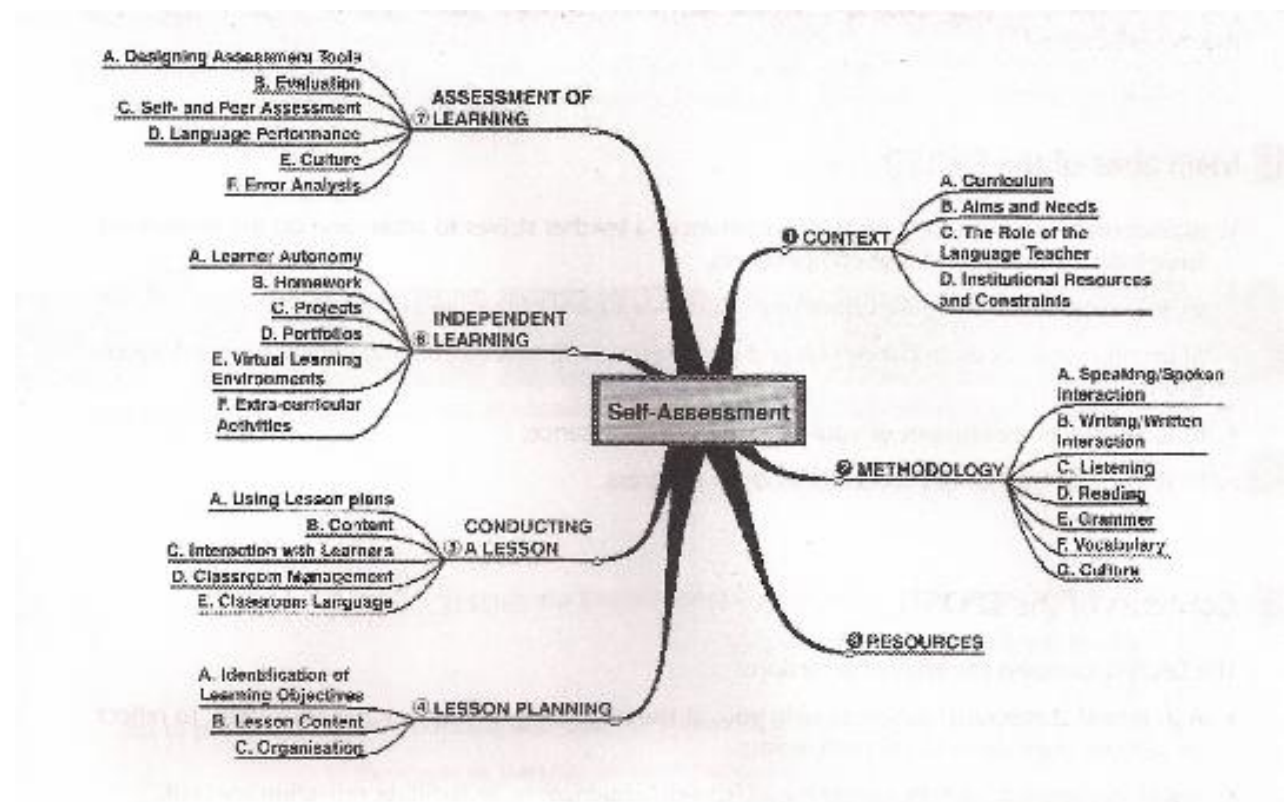


Figure 1. The categories of EPOSTL. (EPOSTL 2007)

As seen in the schema, one of the categories of EPOSTL is independent learning and learner autonomy is one of its sub-divisions, together with home-works, projects, portfolios, extra-curricular activities, etc.

Learner autonomy moves the focus from teaching to learning. It allows learners to work on different tasks, not all doing the same thing at the same time. When implementing learner autonomy through EPOSTL, the university lecturers, the mentors and the student-teachers need to take a lot into consideration. Let's see some ideas:

“The concept of learner autonomy ... emphasizes the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. It focuses on the process rather than the product and encourages learners to develop their own purposes for learning and to see learning as a lifelong process” (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). EPOSTL focuses the idea that ‘Learning to teach and becoming a good teacher is a continuous, autonomous and life-long process’ (EPOSTL, 2007). David Little stresses the importance of the teacher as well; he writes “...but I also believe that for most learners the growth of autonomy requires the stimulus, insight and guidance of a good teacher” (Little, 2000). This idea is embodied in EPOSTL document, on page 45, Learner Autonomy, descriptor: I can guide and assist learners in planning their own learning (6 descriptors)

One of the key principles of promoting learner autonomy through EPOSTL is moving the focus from teaching to learning. This may seem unsafe to new teachers or even experienced teachers who have been the center of attention and in control of their classroom for a long time. But as David Little wrote: “I believe that all truly effective learning entails the growth of autonomy in the learner as regards both the *process* and the *content* of learning” (Little, 2000).

Moving the focus from teaching to learning clearly doesn't mean that the teacher becomes obsolete or redundant. It means a change of pace from where lessons were organized around textbook material, where the teacher was the only source of information, towards student-centered methods. Today the lessons are organized round students and the teacher is a guide, but not necessarily a person directing the learner autonomy process. Lessons today are organized in collaboration with learners in regards to both material and methods with the focus on student-centered methods. This change is not something happening only in our community, it's a change being implemented all over the world, but the pace is different. This is in full accordance with autonomy principles as defined by Lacey (2007) mentioned earlier in this study and with the objectives of EPOSTL. "Language learning in a school context is both a matter of learning individually and in cooperation with others, as well as independent learning with the guidance of a teacher. This means giving the individual learner or groups of learners a chance to take charge of aspects of their own learning processes in order to reach their full potential" (EPOSTL, 2007).

The learner's role in an autonomous environment is not that of a passive receiver of information. "Autonomous learners have the ability and willingness to learn on their own. Learners become successful if they take responsibility for their learning. It is up to learners if they want to learn" (Lowes & Target, 1999).

David Little has written, "Autonomous learners are those who understand their learning, accept responsibility for their learning, take the initiative in planning and executing learning activities and are willing to assess their own learning (Little, 2002). "Autonomous learning is an integral part of learning FL, not an additional method of teaching" (EPOSTL, 2007). Learners' active participation in and responsibility for their own learning process are essential in the field of foreign language learning" (Dam, 1995). Judging from the ideas given by the above outstanding scholars of learner autonomy, it might be said that EPOSTL strives to put these ideas into practice, and practically enables student-teachers to take into their hands the changes of attitudes towards learner autonomy, teacher's role in these changes. EPOSTL also challenges the future-to-be teachers to change and acquire their new role as an autonomous teacher and a learner.

Referring to this simple definition of David Little, 'Learner autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action' (Little 1991), it is clear that 'autonomy' is not merely something given or inherited, it is a capacity, and like any other capacity, it will grow with practice, or be lost through inactivity. It is noticed that there are still teachers that promote students' dependence, still students are not taught or used to apply their knowledge and skills in their teaching practice, in their real teaching environment. This is what the researchers are trying to reshape and reach through EPOSTL, and from this it may be said that the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy may be central to its success.

After starting using EPOSTL and understanding its benefits, student-teachers go on their own, follow-up activities, enhancing learner autonomy. It gives the opportunity for self-assessment, mentor-lecturer assessment and peer assessment. EPOSTL enables student-teachers to plan, reflect upon and assess their learning and teaching process and progress. It incites and helps student-teachers reflect on their learning teaching, plan ahead and learn autonomously.

Here are some descriptors that have close relations with learner autonomy:

*Descriptors on learner autonomy: p. 45*

- *I can evaluate and select a variety of activities which help learners to reflect on their existing knowledge and competence*
- *I can help learners to reflect on their own learning process (6 descriptors)*

### **Homework**

*F. 46: I can provide necessary support for learners to do homework independently (4 descriptors)*

**Projects f. 47** *Very interesting descriptors (6)*

- *I can plan and organize cross-curricular project work myself or in cooperation with other teachers*
- *I can encourage learners to reflect on their work*

**Portfolios f. 48** *(5 descriptors)*

- *I can plan and structure portfolio work*
- *I can encourage self- and peer assessment of portfolio work (EPOSTL, 2007)*

Reflection, interaction and cooperation, processes presented a lot in EPOSTL, are crucial to promoting learner autonomy. (Examples from EPOSTL, 2007)

- *What do you expect most from your teacher education? (p. 11)*
- *What do you think that your teachers/mentors/lecturers expect from you? (p. 11)*
- *How important is for you cooperating with others? (p.11)*
- *Spoken interaction (p. 21)*
- *Written interaction (p. 23)*
- *Interaction with Learners (p.41)*
- *Independent Learning (p. 44)*
- *I can plan and organize cross-curricular project work myself or in cooperation with other teachers (p. 47)*

### **Discussion**

Having in mind student-teachers' perception of learner autonomy, and the role of EPOSTL in this direction, after a scrupulous study of EPOSTL, a questionnaire was conducted with some student-teachers and probation teachers on these issues. The researchers delivered 56 questioners and were able to get back 47 of them. The answers to some of these questions are gathered and interpreted and following are some of the results:

The first question was about students' perception for learner autonomy. Sadly enough it was discovered that some of the students did not have a clear idea about it. Through their answers it was realized that they had never discussed with each other or had read very little about this topic. On the other hand there were some students whose ideas were to some extent more clear. Some of them said: *To feel free to express opinions, ideas, thoughts etc. to be able to take responsibilities for your own action, to take decisions and solve different problems, and: A student that doesn't rely much on the teacher.*

Another question was about the principles of learner autonomy according to students' idea. There were different answers such as: self esteem, self evaluation, self correction etc. One of them even wrote that to reflect on your own work and to take responsibility as well as to express yourself freely without fear of doing/saying something wrong, is a principle of learner autonomy.

When asked about who or what can promote learner autonomy, the students mentioned: the teachers, the lecturer, some courses/subjects and even EPOSTL.

Most of the students consider that the lecturer has an important role in promoting learner autonomy among students. They said that the lecturer should cooperate, interact and even guide students through the right

path. They also suggested that the lecturer should help them to have a high level of self esteem and also to become capable for their own and the society in order to take difficult decisions.

Students declared that during their studies, both in Bachelor and Master Studies there were some courses/subjects that promoted learner autonomy more than others. The students mentioned some of these subjects such as: *Development Psychology, Phonetics, Vocabulary, Writing and Listening, Gender Studies, Second Language Acquisition, Teaching Skills, Didactics and Creative Writing*. Considering the variety of answers it is not sure why the students gave such answers. Is it because of the course/subject? Is it because of the lecturer or it varies from one student to another? Is there any other reason?

Considering the strong relation between EPOSTL and learner autonomy, the students were asked to tell which part of EPOSTL mostly promotes learner autonomy, according to their opinion. It was disappointing to see that many students did not answer this question. According to the researchers this might be because of two reasons, either they do not have a clear perception on learner autonomy, or they do not pay much attention to EPOSTL. But still some other students said that it was: *“self and peer assessment” because they can assess and evaluate their knowledge, their capabilities and also learn how to become a teacher by assessing peers. They become aware of what they know and what they don't know.*

When asked about in which skill they had more autonomy the students had various ideas. The next figure illustrates their answers.

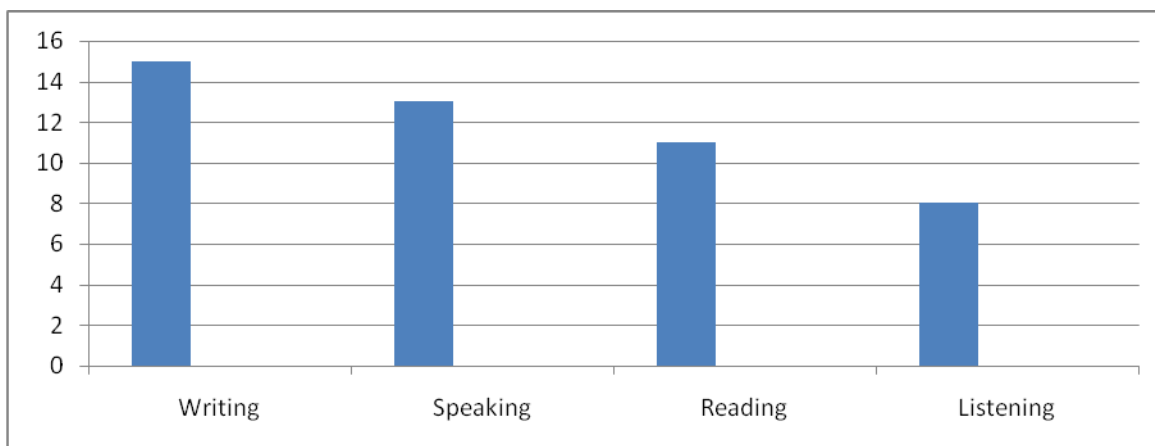


Figure 2. The skills in which the students have more autonomy. (Nr of participants 47)

Another question was if the students had seen elements of learner autonomy while conducting their passive practice? They answered that they had seen some elements, but the percentage of these elements raised as students grew older. They had noticed that young learners generally wanted their teachers to be “over their heads”. But this was not the case for students of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Some very interesting responses emerged when students were asked to comment on the relation between interaction and learner autonomy. Students said that there is a strong relation between them and that the more students interact the higher the learner autonomy is. They even suggest that: *Students should be free to interact with each other and by giving and taking information and experiences they learn about life and how to be independent in all aspects.*

The students were asked to tell if they agree or disagree with the following statement and also to comment it: *Teacher and learner autonomy are inseparable, if teachers stop teaching, the learners will stop learning*. Figure 3 illustrates their answers.

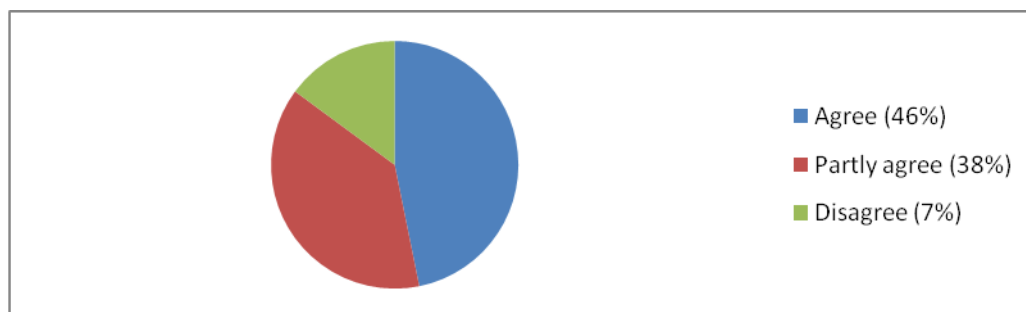


Figure 2

Some of their comments are as shown here:

- *That's true, because a learner autonomy needs a teacher to guide him.*
- *It might not necessarily be true. It might be that if the teacher stops teaching then the students might try to find information on their own.*
- *That is not always the case. There are students that are better while learning by themselves. Of course a teacher is an important link on a student development but that doesn't mean that learners will stop learning when the teacher stops teaching.*
- *Students can't learn if they don't have a guide to lead them. The teacher guides them and they move forward*

One of them even sees differences between what happens in Albania compared to other countries, as he/she writes: *Actually here in Albania this statement is true but if I am to talk about other countries, well, children can learn even without a teacher because nowadays they can learn from the internet and they can learn whatever subject they want to learn.*

## Conclusions

Moving the focus from teaching to learning is not simple, easy or a change that happens overnight. It requires a different way of thinking about classroom dynamics and the roles of teachers, as well as learners. It requires a lot of planning and should be undertaken in association with learners, student-teachers, mentors, university lecturers, and all actors and stakeholders.

There are a number of tools that teachers and learners can use to facilitate autonomous learning: group work and reflection, portfolios, microteaching, pair work, projects, posters, etc.

It is very important to introduce and use EPOSTL as a tool that promotes LA through observation, language learning, and intercultural experiences. It provides pedagogical tools to foster LA of the student-teachers. It is imperative finding ways how to promote LA among them, during their passive and active teaching practice through keeping and enriching their portfolios under the model of EPOSTL.

EPOSTL helps the student-teachers to find instruments and tools, and gives insights for writing their Master thesis. This needs independence, interaction, collaboration and motivation.

Teacher serves both as a facilitator and a counselor. Reflection on the learning process is an aim of EPOSTL, it is another key component of LA. Being aware of the learning process makes them autonomous



For successful implementation of LA, assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment are very important, they are new concepts to our mentality. Self-assessment is a crucial part of EPOSTL. The learners take an active role in the assessment process with self and peer assessment, group work assessment, and portfolios, which all play a significant part in student-teacher's teaching and learning.

### Suggestions

Educational policies should be more orientated towards promoting autonomy, by trying to reduce teacher-centered approaches as much as possible, focusing more on student-centered approaches. Practically, it is still a mentality, it's a cultural thing that teachers teach, students learn. The new concepts find it very difficult to be introduced, the lecturers, the mentors, the student-teachers, the community should embrace the new tendency towards LA, towards communicative, interactive and autonomous methods. The whole idea of teaching and learning needs to be reshaped and reoriented towards LA, where the learner takes the responsibility for his/her own learning and teaching, and becoming a good teacher. No teacher can force student-teachers to learn to teach, even if they try, they will not be successful.

*Learner autonomy should be clear in learner's and teacher's mind, as a capacity that can be defined as: learn on your own, plan on your own, reflect on your own, but all these cannot be successful without interaction, without collaboration, without peer and self-assessment, without teachers' and students' reflection.*

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