Novices at the Wheel

By Rebecca Blouwolff

When educators put students in the driver's seat, we also liberate ourselves. We are freed of the burdens of needing to have all the answers, of knowing what students want out of our courses, and of deciding how they'll learn best.

Moreover, adopting and modeling a growth mindset in the world language classroom can also free students. They are better able to shed self-limiting beliefs about their own intelligence and capacity, and to shift their focus toward exploring new strategies for discovering what is most effective for them.
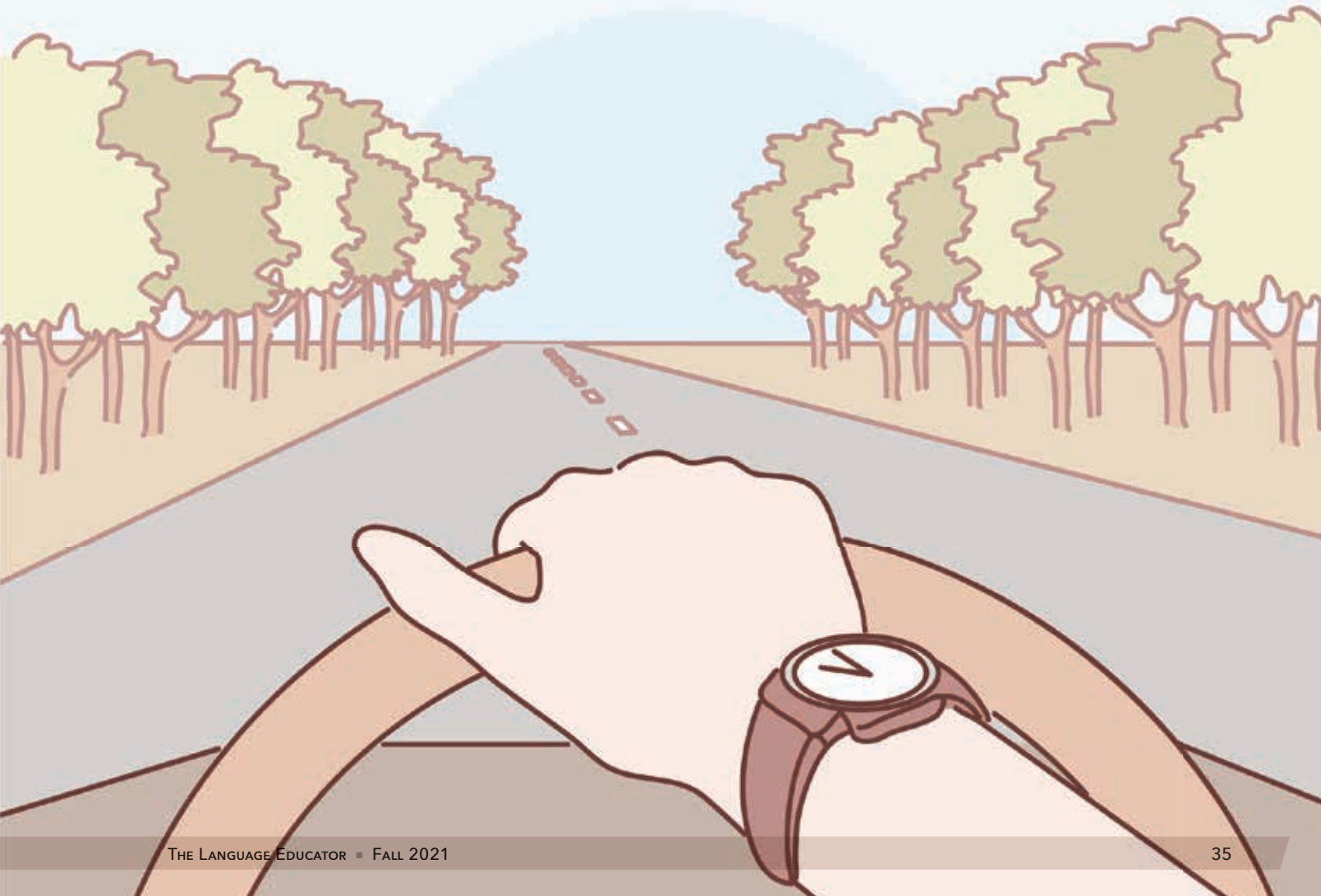
As students learn how to learn, they develop their toolbox and feel greater independence and self-confidence. They may even surprise parents who, based on their own experiences a generation ago, weren't sure their kids could manage to learn a language.
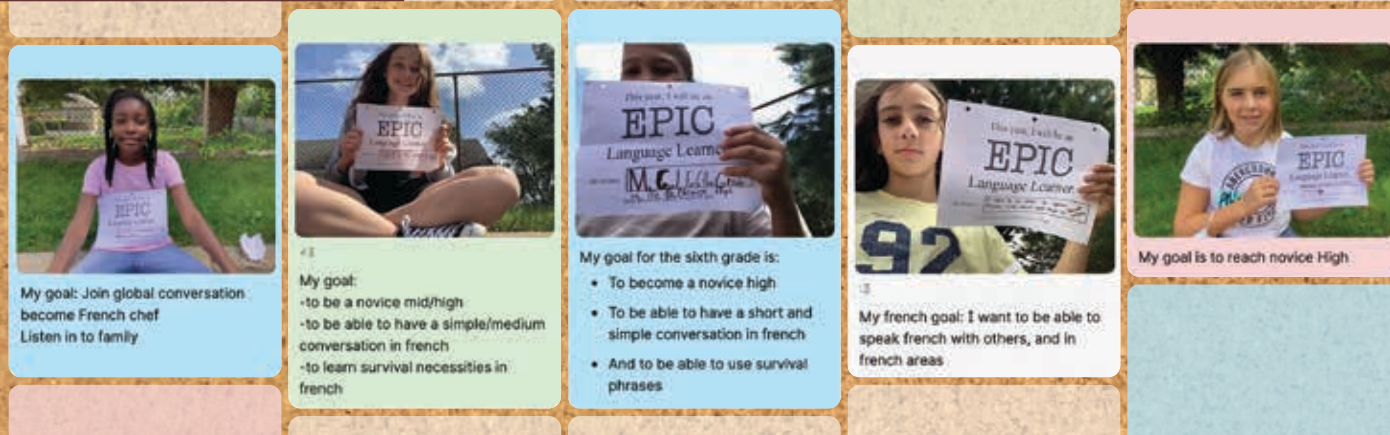
Here's a brief tour of ways to let students lead from Day One, organized by typical learner questions.

? What's this class like?

Talking explicitly about strategies helps students expand their skill sets, so I like to open the year by presenting a slideshow about myself in the target language. Creative Language Class blog offers a snazzy template (*creativelanguageclass.com/first-days-first-impressions*).

After listening and taking notes (you can spice this up by making it into a bingo game), students share *what* they understood and—most importantly—how they understood. I make a big

My goal: Join global conversation become French chef Listen in to family

My goal:
-to be a novice mid/high
-to be able to have a simple/medium conversation in french
-to learn survival necessities in french

My goal for the sixth grade is:
• To become a novice high
• To be able to have a short and simple conversation in french
• And to be able to use survival phrases

My french goal: I want to be able to speak french with others, and in french areas

My goal is to reach novice High

deal of recording all of their "how they understood" strategies and refer to them collectively as "being a language detective."

This phrase becomes shorthand for deploying strategies to make sense of an authentic text and I refer to it any time students explain how they figured something out. My goal is to show students that each one of them is already a language detective, albeit perhaps a junior gumshoe.

While French may be quite new to students, they still have valuable tools to break down a message and make an educated guess about it. Building upon this idea, our department has a hallway bulletin board at the entrance to our wing that suggests the following "traits of a successful language learner," as shared by Cathryn Robbins @profe_robbins on Twitter:

• Doesn't cram
• Talks around words they don't know
• Takes risks
• Has fun with the language
• Participates fully in class
• Uses new vocabulary
• Doesn't give up
• Takes opportunities to practice
• Isn't afraid to make mistakes

Some years I invite students to choose two traits that they hope to adopt in my course and journal about them. Another part of setting the stage is ensuring that students have a basic grasp of the course's performance target. I'm partial to a lesson on the Creative Language Class blog that invites students to write about a familiar topic in English using different proficiency levels to better understand the characteristics of each level. (*tinyurl.com/9x3732nr*).

Learners who understand what it means to communicate like a Novice or Intermediate speaker, even in broad terms, have valuable information that can help them reflect on their performances and set goals.

? Why am I here?

Once aware of course-level goals, learners are ready to set personal learning goals. Shelby County Schools' EPIC learning goals posters

(*leveluplanguage.weebly.com/be-epic.html*) are editable and allow students to establish goals that are personally meaningful to them. Here are some examples:

• My goal is to be able to make friends with someone who only speaks French.
• My goal is to be a good parrot so I can travel the world with my skills.
• I want to understand what my mom's saying on the phone when she talks to relatives in Cameroon.
• I want to be able to order something in a French bakery.

Celebrate students' goals by making a wall display of their posters or by having them take selfies with them and post them on a Padlet. Be sure to give students the opportunity to revisit their goals mid-course and then reflect on them at the end of the year. Did they meet their goals? Why or why not?

? How am I doing?

It can be powerful for students to complete journal prompts in their first language where they rate their own effort, identify strategies they are currently using, and set a specific goal for the coming term. Inexpensive exam books make for simple journals to keep everything together in one place, even year to year when passed from teacher to teacher.

Teachers need not do much with these beyond encouraging students and urging them ahead. Just the act of reflecting on one's performance and looking ahead is worthwhile. My typical journal response comments are "You can do it!" and "Go for it!"

In a similar vein, students might estimate their own term grade and write sample report card comments to identify their strengths and describe areas for growth. When students overestimate or underestimate their performance, as sometimes happens, those are opportunities for a one-on-one "curious conversation" between teacher and student to realign students' self-perceptions with reality.

Photos of students holding EPIC signs:
- My goal: to reach novice mid-high and be able to understand my sisters and mom (we aren't french but they all speak it)
- MY Selfie — My goal: become novice high
- Mme Blouwolff — My goal: Engage all students in reaching Novice Mid proficiency.
- For a goal in french is to say at least a 5 sentence thing smoothly without having to think about it, (role of my tongue.)
- My for sixth grade goal is to become a survivor

Do other students *really* ...?

Students who struggle to adopt effective learning strategies can be inspired by peer examples that showcase learners putting forth strong effort and using available resources to maximum effect.

Having students score sample pieces of work is one way to draw students' attention to the characteristics of work that meets or exceeds the standard. These characteristics can then form a checklist for peer review and self-evaluation of subsequent tasks.

A short conversation in L1 during which students share study strategies with one another, and then agree to try a new strategy and reflect on it, builds students' repertoire of techniques and makes visible and explicit more ways to be a successful learner. This could lead to the creation of a strategy bank that is shared with all students as a website or a handout.

Are we there yet?

By late winter, it is common for students (and even their teachers) to feel bogged down and wonder if they are making any progress in language class. This is an ideal moment to pull out some student work from the beginning of the year and allow students to notice how they've improved.

One easy way for learners to track their progress is to have them do a 10-minute quick write or fluency count once a month. Clementi and Terrill provide more information in *The Keys to Planning for Learning, Second Edition* (ACTFL, 2017). Have each student keep the writing samples in a file folder in the classroom to ensure they aren't lost and record the number of sentences and new words used in each piece on a simple table.

In March, students are astounded to see what their writing looked like back in September and are well-poised to set goals for June.

Ultimately, each of these strategies promotes learners' metacognition and reflection while making effective tools for success more visible and explicit. When students know what they need to be able to do and how to learn, they become more independent and self-reliant. This is a gift not only to them and their future selves, but also to their teachers.

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ABOVE: Students with their EPIC goals

BELOW TOP: Be EPIC! poster available for download
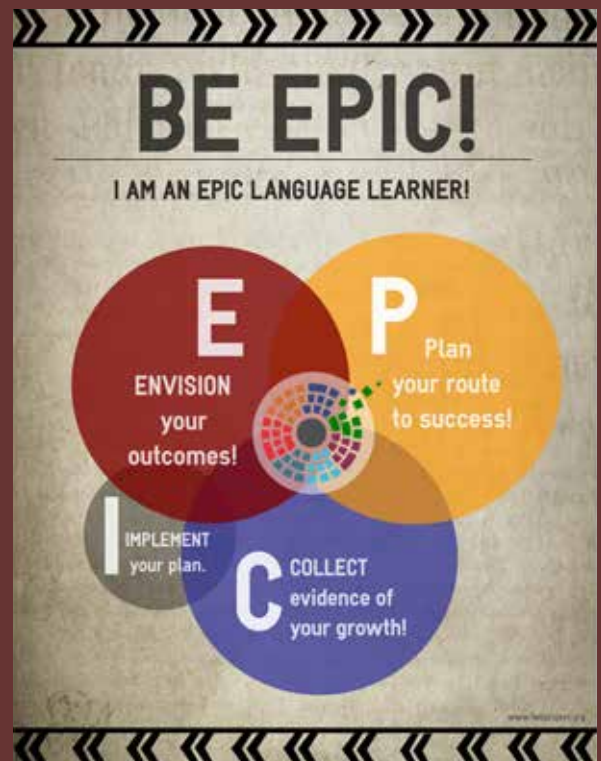
Resources

Creative Language Class blog template for back-to-school teacher slideshow:
tinyurl.com/jvwzrj94

Creative Language Class blog lesson on explaining proficiency levels to students:
tinyurl.com/9x3732nr

Shelby County Schools' EPIC learning goals posters:
leveluplanguage.weebly.com/be-epic.html

Fluency counts are described in Clementi and Terrill's *The Keys to Planning for Learning* (available in the ACTFL online store)