Individual Learning in a Language School Context—Why? What? How?

Frank Heyworth

The role of the ESL teacher is explored in this discussion of individualization in self-access learning centres.

Most of us remember very clearly our first ESL class. Mine was in adult evening classes in the North of Sweden. I arrived as a fully qualified professional—in the 1960s that meant I'd followed a 4-week orientation course—and confronted twelve students in a bare classroom in an elementary school. I didn't know much about them. They didn't know much about me. The most difficult student to cope with was Kattia, a Finnish lady in her 60s who just couldn't assimilate the idea that she was required to do anything other than repeat what the teacher said. So I'd say, "My name's Frank. What's your name?" and she'd repeat "My name's Frank. What's your name?" "No, *my* name's Frank. Your name's . . . ?" and she'd say "No, my name's Frank. Your name's . . . ?" For at least three lessons we had a sort of total symbiosis between teacher and learner. Eventually we got to communicating a bit better (I learnt some Swedish) and she said to me, "You don't seem to be very good at teaching me English."

Another early memory in the 1960s: I was scheduled to give a demonstration lesson on a training course to Ghanaian primary school teachers. The little school was a set of concrete pillars with a corrugated iron roof on top. It was at least 100°F in the shade. The floor was simply of packed earth and there was no furniture of any kind—blackboards were coming as part of the next five year plan. "Shall we bring the class in now?" asked the local inspector, and in trooped multitudes of nine year olds, all carrying one pen, one full inkpot, one sheet of paper. They sat down cross-legged on the floor, so tightly packed—there were at least 80 in a class—that the only place to put the inkpot was on the head of the boy or girl in front. The most remarkable feature of the lesson was that not a single drop of ink was spilled. With a candle, a jam jar and a glass pot I showed them the old experiment of lighting the candle, putting the jam jar over it, and showing how the water level in the pot rose when the candle went out—even in those benighted days people had ideas about authentic experience and func-

tional language teaching, but we were too underdeveloped to have impressive labels for them. The children were asked to describe what happened on their piece of paper and to write their explanation of why and how the water had risen for the next day. The following morning at sunrise, I heard some noise outside my bedroom and blearily saw that some sixty youngsters were outside my window waving their pieces of paper and chanting their explanations—the one I liked best was "the candle ate the air up."

The point of these two examples is that they show how much things have changed in the last twenty years: Kattia thought that teaching and learning were identical, that there was a complete match between them. In Ghana, there was no opportunity to individualize, because there was no variety of resources; there was not even any physical space to expand the classroom.

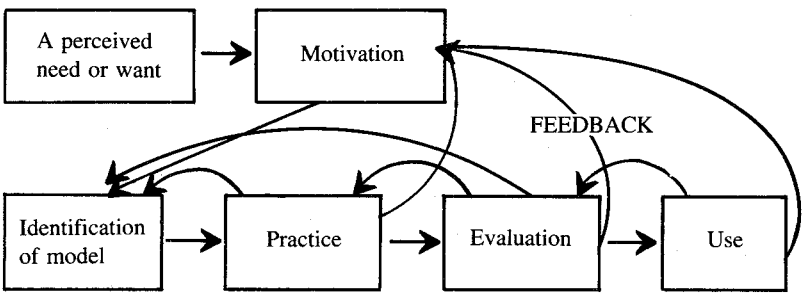
And now in Canada I have seen and talked about andragogics, and self-directed learning, and monitored and guided and counselled self-access work. We are no longer sure that there is any match between what we teach and what students learn. In my present job, I have been fortunate enough to work on the design and setting up of what we call multi-media resources centres (but you could call them learning centres or self-access centres) in our Eurocentre schools and to work on purpose-built language centres where we have been able to embody some of our ideas on language learning.

In a new school we have built in Cambridge we have created a learning centre which takes up 25% of our teaching space and about the same proportion of our human resources. It combines books, magazines, workcards, worksheets, video cassettes, computer programmes to offer a very rich learning environment. In this paper, I would like to explain why we felt it was worthwhile concentrating so many of our resources on self-directed learning; I would like to outline some "recipes" for what teachers can do to create opportunities for self-assessed work; and I would like to describe what students do in the centres. Above all, I would like to reflect on the teacher's role in a changing learning environment.

Why so much emphasis on independent learning? First of all, learners are different. You never get a homogeneous class: they all have different learning styles, different learning aptitudes, interests, feelings, energy. The more opportunity you can give for variety of approach or pathway, the more you can hope—by a kind of splatter effect—to meet learners' needs and wishes. One learner might want to catch up on an absence, another to follow-up something she has not quite understood—remedial work, in fact. Some learners want to consolidate what they have learnt; others, to push a little further to extend their learning or to

prepare for future classes. As I said, I have never had a homogeneous class at the outset, and even if they were homogeneous at the beginning, they would soon change as the course progressed because of different rates of progress and growth.

Secondly, there are parts of the learning process which are best done independently, and others which are best done in a group and with teachers. Learning a language—at least a second one or a foreign one—is very much like learning anything else. A very simple model of learning would involve the following things:



Learners need to see a strong reason for putting effort into the learning process: they need some confidence that the way they are going about learning—the books, the resources, the teachers, the school or university—is likely to bring them success. As they, by definition, do not know the language they are learning, they need to identify some model of it which they can understand, or analyse, or imitate, and they need opportunities for practice. They need some kind of evaluation to tell them whether they have understood properly, or practised sufficiently, and they need to be able to apply what they have learnt to actual use. All these stages require feedback if they are to be effective. None of these seem to me to be in any way specific to language learning nor admit of much controversy. The questions of what kind of model and what kind of practice are more difficult to fix. If we believe in the basic differences between experts and novices, we will want to simplify and structure the model, systematise the way the practice is carried out and make sure that the feedback is well-organized, detailed and specific. If we believe learning is mainly holistic, we will concentrate on making sure the models are authentic, involving, and that practice is as realistic as possible. If we are sensible we will probably accept that some people learn best in one way, some in another, and that, similarly, some things are best learnt one way, some are best learnt in another.

Thus, to answer my first question, the "why" of independent learning

is the same one as "why teach?". There are some parts of the learning process which are best done independently; there are other parts which are best done (i.e., most quickly, most efficiently) with teacher intervention. It is quite likely that these will differ for different individuals. It is worth looking in a little more detail at the things which are often done best by teachers.

In passing, it seems to me that perhaps there is at the moment a crisis of confidence in the whole *raison d'etre* of teaching. Non-directiveness, communicative fashion, ideas on "natural" learning processes have led some teachers to believe their efforts will damage the tender shoots of the learner's own thought processes and that this constitutes unjustifiable interference with both personality and learning. A colleague of mine, Roger Scott, regularly produces an April Fool's Day parody on language teaching fashions. A paper he wrote on what he called the Contemplative Approach to Language Learning proved conclusively that all language production was likely to lead to error, that having error pointed out leaves deep emotional scars and that, therefore, the language classroom should limit itself initially to imagining what the language to be learnt might be like. An initial period of 50 hours of silent contemplation was recommended. This, he proved conclusively again, reduced error to zero and cut down damage to the learner's psyche quite radically. It will not surprise you that there were a number of readers who did not identify that it was a parody and expressed serious interest in developing the contemplative method.

If teachers are not going to spend their time contemplating their navels, or their students', what is their role? What can they do usefully and meaningfully? I think they have three main jobs: the first is motivating students, the second is providing models, the third is assessing progress and giving feedback. I would like to look at each of these in more detail.

It is clear that teachers play a secondary part in motivating students. One of the few things we know about language learning is that most people learn quickly and effectively if they really need to or want to, however antiquated, boring, or unsophisticated the teaching methods. We know, too, that most of the learners most of us have are not so strongly motivated that they are prepared to overcome the obstacles of bad, uninteresting teaching. We know that where teachers believe strongly in a "method", be it Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Counselling Learning, or Berlitz, this has a strong motivating effect on some learners at least, and leads them to make remarkable progress. It is a weakness, perhaps, of those who believe in eclectic approaches that they do not lend themselves to missionary zeal—"the eclectic way to Serbo-Croat in three weeks" doesn't ring true.

Yet the motivating role of teachers is a vital one. It means being interested in the learners and providing space for them to identify with the instructional process. It means cooperation in setting realistic objectives. It means establishing the learners' confidence in the format of the course and in the resources and materials available for it. It means clarity about what a teacher can achieve and about what is the learners' responsibility. It involves providing the skills which will enable the learner to be autonomous intelligently, in those areas of language learning where independence is productive. It also involves providing guidance where this is useful. So, the first and perhaps the most important part the teacher plays is in creating motivation by encouraging confidence, trust and independence.

The second essential element in what teachers can do is to provide models. Some recent approaches to language teaching have concentrated so much on the quality of the relationship between teacher and learner, and on learner-centredness that the fact that the teacher knows the language and the learner by definition does not has been forgotten. A language teacher's job is the presentation of language, interesting language which is meaningful for the learner—in both uses of meaningful: that the learner can understand it and finds it relevant to what he or she wants to learn. The skills of selecting, grading, explaining, and exploiting text are still part of a language teacher's essential armoury.

The third major part of a teacher's role is that of the provider of feedback, the person who gives an answer to the questions "How am I doing?", "What shall I do next?", "How far have I got?". It's a role which has often been in conflict with that of the teacher as motivator. The person who brings negative feedback finds it difficult to be the one who boosts the confidence of the learner in the system. And if we are to treat learners, whether adults or children, as autonomous and independent, the feedback will not always be the facile positive encouragement of the behaviourists. However, where teachers put into effect open, direct, meaningful feedback which takes learners into their confidence and which is linked to commonly negotiated objectives, the process can reinforce motivation. There is a lot of evidence that shared criteria can promote effective self-assessment by students and that this sharing is the way in which the learning process can be self-generating.

So far, this paper on "Individual learning: Why? What? and How?" has advanced a long way and has concentrated mainly on teaching and what teachers do. There is possibly a certain amount of self-preservation in a teacher's insistence that there is still an important role for a teacher to play. In France I was once a member of a committee which was asked to write a report on whether there was a need for language teaching in the French educational system. Noone will be surprised that a

panel of twenty language teachers came to the weighty conclusion that, in general, language teaching was a good thing which ought to be encouraged.

Nevertheless, some examination of what teachers can do well is relevant to the question of independent learning. To specify what teachers *can* do, implies what they cannot do. It is clear that they cannot practice for the learner; they cannot repeat, explore, experiment, use the language. They cannot undertake all those activities through which learners take possession of a language, begin to use it as a means of mediation with the environment, as a vehicle for self-expression. In Eurocentres, as part of a project intended to define syllabus, we asked some 750 students to tell us the things they wanted most to be able to do with the language they were learning. We gave them a list of 57 functions, activities and tasks, and asked them to pick out their priorities. Surprisingly for us, as our work has been closely associated with the Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe, the absolutely essential survival language such as you find in the threshold level received low priority. At the head of the list came "expressing feelings and emotion," "solving problems," "understanding the media." The highest rated "practical" task was various elements of telephoning, but it may be that this in modern society is a form of self-expression much more than an element of survival.

Learners then, I think, need to take possession of a language—the French word "apprivoiser" expresses the concept far more fully, and this should in my opinion be the dominant factor in the way we organize independent learning—space, time and opportunity for this privatising of the language should be the key to the way we organize the opportunities for individual learning. Learners will use the space and time in the ways which help them to do this. The ways may be very different from what we "advanced" and inventive language teachers would imagine. In our new school, the computer lab has a wide selection of ingenious programs, simulations, where you can play at being British Prime Minister, or adventure games where you find the Lost Kingdom (you might imagine these two as identical!). There are lots of clever text manipulation programs. It was, therefore, galling to find that one of the most used programs at the end of the first year was a simple, apparently mind-bogglingly dull program which involves learning the irregular simple past tenses of English verbs. Our learners quite clearly identified this as a learning task which needed repetition, which fitted into their own schemata about how language could be learned. It probably fitted into their previous and familiar learning patterns and may have given security and reassurance after the intense communicative and productive activities in the classroom. Other learners spend hours listening,

apparently passively; some spend a long time browsing; many do fairly mechanised drill exercises. As they gain confidence, they vary and extend their ways of exploring the language and the environment.

Next, what can teachers do to create opportunities for self-directed learning? At last, I shall be resolutely practical. Self-directed work requires lots of opportunities for learning, and therefore you need lots of material. I think three things are essential. *Magpies*—teachers who will pick up everything they see; beg, borrow (not steal) anything—handouts, ads, timetables, travel brochures, newspaper articles. The amount of "text" language which is available for free is incredible. A *laminator*—so that you can keep things longer and display them more attractively. You can cut up books and laminate them so that 24 students can use a book which has 24 units at the same time. Third, a *hiding place*—to hide away all the keys to cupboards, to filing cabinets, to bookshelves. Teachers feel a strong desire to know what their students are doing, to separate classroom work, to give special assignments. Resist this—a learning centre is a place for free access, for enjoyment, for exploration; it should be attractive, comfortable; the signs and display should say to learners—this is your place and your space. It should contain student work—newspapers, magazines, projects, computer newsreels, student-made videos.

One way we have developed of helping students explore is the concept of "pathways". On any piece of material you can put a suggestion at the bottom of something else the student might wish to do: "After you've done this worksheet on grammar, why not work on the functions, listen to a story, watch a video."

An example of what I mean is the Globe project, where the learner starts out from a popular article about Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and finishes up visiting and interviewing the groups, real ones, proposing and opposing a new scheme which will rebuild the theatre and associate it with some office and residential building. Students who go through this resource project read, listen, watch, practise and use a lot of language. The confidence they gain enables them to make contact and explore further. The language they learn feeds back into their learning schemata and into the work they do in the classroom.

Finally, how does this change the teacher's job? We have found that where teachers integrate the individualised work into their classroom activity, students use it better, more and more productively. Students seem to benefit most from individual learning activities when their teacher can say, "to get the most of this week's work, you all ought to watch the video about . . . You'll need to have listened to the cassette on . . . for Friday's role play. Jose, I know you had difficulty with . . . —why don't you do some of the worksheets on . . . ?" Such

resources extend the teacher's role beyond the classroom. With all the new resources and the new media, and the new ideas on individualisation, the profession is still as thrilling, still as much fun as it was in those early innocent days in Sweden and Ghana.

THE AUTHOR

Frank Heyworth is at present Head of the English Schools of the Eurocentre Foundation where he coordinates educational development. He has worked as teacher, adviser, teacher-trainer in Scandinavia, Nigeria, Ghana, Iran and France. His publications include "Discussions", "Intermediate Language Skills—Reading", and his present interests include assessment of communicative language teaching and the development of autonomous learning programmes.