

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a recent discussion of 'autonomy' in language learning, which took place at the Joint Conference in Hong Kong from 23rd to 25th of July, 1994. The aims of the paper are to present the findings at the conference, and propose several ideas concerning the current English curriculum at Miyazaki Municipal University.

## **Autonomy in Language Learning: possible applications at Miyazaki Municipal University**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There has been a great deal of discussion on the importance of 'autonomy' in language learning in the last decade or so. Many researchers have reported the efficacy and significance of a learner-centered approach to language teaching in the acquisition of L2 language (cf. Little, 1991; Widdows and Voller, 1991; Nunan, 1988).

This paper reports on a recent discussion of the subject, which took place at the International Conference on Autonomy in Language Learning in Hong Kong from 23rd to 25th of July, 1994. We will then discuss its possible applications to the current English curriculum at Miyazaki Municipal University (hereafter, MMU), and make suggestions about the possible future language program at MMU.

### **DEFINITIONS OF 'AUTONOMY'**

It is crucial to understand what is meant by 'autonomy'. Nearly all plenary speakers in Hong Kong agreed that as they have defined the concept, autonomy is not:

1. a steady state achieved by learners
2. independent learning, in the sense that students are simply left alone to achieve whatever they want on their own
3. an abdication of responsibility by the teachers
4. a teaching method: not something that teachers do to students
5. a synonym for self-study

When the above negative characteristics are taken into consideration, the central issues which encompass the current views of 'autonomy' among the scholars are as follows:

1. Autonomy is a radical embrace through practice of a dynamic democracy in the classroom. It assumes and requires responsibility from its participants - BOTH teachers and learners - in an on-going cooperative construction of the curriculum.

2. Instructors who practice "autonomy" emphasize the creation of environments in which students can discover strengths and weaknesses themselves, evaluating their performance against agreed upon goals and standards.

3. Many proponents of autonomy regard self-study and the use of self-access centers as an important part of the learner's practice, though self-criticism and the process of evaluation by and with the instructor is at the center of the practice.

As can be seen above, the important aspects of autonomous language learning can be divided into

two components: (1) the instructors' and the learners' active roles in the classroom; and (2) the learners' active participation in the design of the learning processes in a self-access center.

The two parts which comprise the core of autonomous language learning have to be considered carefully in order to produce optimum conditions for effective learning. Each aspect is, therefore, discussed in the next sections.

## ROLES OF THE INSTRUCTOR AND THE LEARNER IN THE CLASSROOM

When considering their roles in an autonomous language learning environment, several important factors were taken into account at the conference: (1) causes of non-learning in the present environment; (2) learning strategies; and (3) teaching strategies.

Instructors often find that some learners make little progress in learning the target language, though they are exposed to useful teaching materials and classroom activities. Willing (1989) describes some of the causes of non-learning as follows:

1. the learner's psychological factors - incapable of focusing on learning due to stress.
2. the teaching environment - not suitable for some of the learners (especially the formal learning environment).
3. the teaching materials - not perceived as effective or relevant.
4. the learner's language aptitude - too high or low for the class activities.

The causes of non-learning can be attributed to other factors such as lack of interest, mis-match between the learner's and the instructor's perception of learning and so forth. However, it is also important to mention that some learners in the same learning environments DO succeed in learning the target language. What are the possible reasons for this discrepancy?

Various studies (Stern, 1975; Rubin, 1981; and Naiman et al., 1978) have been conducted to identify the attributes of successful language learners. Previous researchers reported that successful language learners used certain strategies in learning, though inter-learner variability exists. For instance, Rubin (1981) proposed a scheme that identifies the learning strategies of successful language learners. The strategies consist of clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, and practice, which are identified as those that directly affect learning. On the contrary, the strategies described here are not often used by unsuccessful language learners.

Teaching strategies are also an important factor in promoting optimum language learning. Heath (1992 cited in Nunan, 1994) reports that learning is enhanced in selecting content, learning tasks and evaluation. Other studies (cf. Widdows and Voller, 1991; Nunan, 1988) also report the importance of the learner-centered approach. This approach to teaching emphasizes beginning with the learners by focusing on their needs and interests. It also often includes an explicit focus on teaching meta-cognitive strategies in the hope that learners will discover the learning techniques which are most effective on an individual basis.

The roles of the instructor/ the learner suggested at the conference can, therefore, be summarized as follows:

### Roles of the instructor

1. Create a learning environment in which the learner feels comfortable (no emotional stress)
2. introduce learning strategies that the learner can engage in.
3. draw the learner into constructive contact with the course content and tasks, which urges the instructor to provide authentic materials.
4. promote the learner's evaluation of his/her own progress

5. provide different learning strategies to the learners, so they can adopt those most suitable for them in pursuit of their goals.
6. guide the learner to become users of the target language (NOT mere memorizers and test takers).
7. Fully understand the aptitude of the learner.

#### Roles of the learner

1. Take responsibility for one's own learning.
2. Find learning strategies that fit best in one's own learning behavior, and consciously evaluate one's own progress.
3. Be willing to take risks in the process of learning.
4. Actively involve oneself in communicating in the target language.
5. Actively participate in the selection of course contents and tasks.

Once the instructor and the learner understand their roles in achieving their common goals, their actual practice of the teaching/learning task can move towards harmonious cooperation. As is clear from the above, it is important for the learner not only to engage in the activities in the classroom, but also to actively pursue their goals outside the classroom.

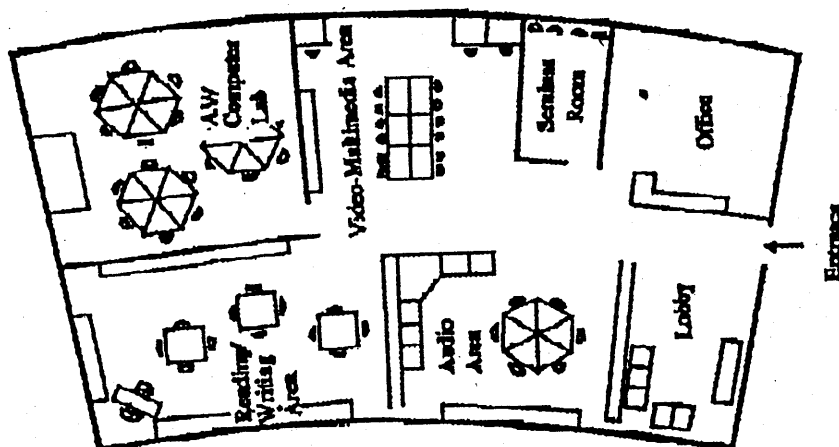
During the conference, we observed two self-access centers in Hong Kong. Both emphasized a mixture of learning media and made overt attempts through the use of handouts, wall posters, and on-line help services to encourage the learner to ask for help when necessary. The self-access centers at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (hereafter, HKUST) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (hereafter, CUHK) are like comfortable small town libraries divided into study areas devoted to particular learning mediums: books and magazines, listening materials, video materials and mini computer labs. The learner is urged to make use of all the learning resources available, from language textbooks, dictionaries and worksheets to the self-study software programs available in the computer labs. Counseling services are on offer and students are encouraged to take advantage of human resources in addition to the technological and material resources. In a testament to the benefits of establishing self-access centers, Dr. Edith Esch (1994) noted that self-study had increased at Cambridge University by 75% over a five-year span, and that the advisory service had recorded a 57% increase over the same period. We, therefore, turn to the design and the uses of self-access centers in promoting autonomy in language learning.

#### DESIGNS AND USES OF SELF-ACCESS CENTER

The design and the uses of a self-access center go hand in hand. For the learner to make maximal use of the center, design factors are crucial. As mentioned above, the center is only a part of promoting autonomy in language learning. It is crucial that the instructor be involved in the entire process, acting not only as a teacher, but also as an advisor and helper for the learner. Keeping this concept in mind, we'd like to introduce one of the major self-access centers established at HKUST, and describe how the self-access center is set up and used by the learner.

The self-access center at HKUST is divided into 7 areas: (1) lobby; (2) audio area; (3) reading/writing area; (4) audio-visual/computer lab; (5) video/multimedia area; (6) seminar room; and (7) office. The following shows a schematic view of the self-access center:

Fig. 1 SELF-ACCESS CENTER AT HKUST



As the above schematic representation indicates, the learner has ample opportunities to select materials in accordance with his/her preferred learning strategies. For instance, the learner who is at the beginning level can review the course content in the reading/writing room in which various types of books (ex. speaking, listening, pronunciation) are provided. In addition, tapes on many topics (English, Chinese etc) are stored alphabetically in the Audio Area for the learner. Video tapes, CD-ROM discs, and educational software are also available for the learner. Furthermore, internet access has been provided, so the learner can send e-mail, asking questions to the office or communicate with anyone outside the center by means of computers.

Learners, while studying learning strategies in class with the help of the instructor, come to the center, and try out various learning strategies to examine their learning progress. Thus, learning can be enhanced through extensive involvement in the target language.

The concept of autonomy in language learning and the functions of a self-access center have been introduced and discussed. As mentioned earlier, this concept has been widely adopted by universities all over the world, and many positive results have been reported. We'd, therefore, like to turn to the next important issue - the applicability of autonomous language learning at MMU.

#### APPLICATIONS AT MMU

Our university has been established for several purposes. One of the aims is to help students acquire practical English skills. English skills can provide a means to increased intercultural communications as well as provide a clearly valuable asset in students' pursuit of professional achievement in the global economy. With sufficient English ability our students could correspond and even work with students and scholars living outside Japan.

We, the English faculty members, have a great responsibility in helping our students attain the necessary skills. The university currently offers five different courses to the students - reading, writing, LL, conversation, and current English courses. The communication skills (i.e., LL and conversation courses) are taught by four faculty members, with one assistant and one part-time instructor; the other aspects of the language are taught by five members (including one part timer).

Unlike in junior and senior high schools, students have the opportunity to appreciate various teaching methods offered by individual members. Faculty members are independent in the sense

that they can determine teaching materials and study tasks freely. However, it might prove advantageous to our students if there were a greater consensus as to what and how to teach each course. If our goal is to help our students aspire to meaningful autonomy as learners (Bruce, 1994), or to become "disciplinary experts" (Gardner, 1992), the social relations of the classroom will necessarily become more open to negotiation than is traditional. It must be admitted that at present, most students are sorely lacking in the experience necessary for the achievement of autonomous or self-regulated learning. Our purpose here is to explore approaches that may provide the stimulus and the requisite environment for that transformation.

Another issue we have to take into account concerns the establishment of a self-access center at the university. We currently have one self-study room in which students have access to tapes and video tapes. The use of the self-study room is, however, limited to the learner in terms of (1) time (i.e. from 9am to 6pm) and the amount of audio-visual equipment. There is also a LL office where some English textbooks and video tapes are shelved. Most reference books are shelved in the library, however.

An immediate question which arises among the English faculty members is: what can we really do in the present situation?

Concerning classroom activities, Nunan (1994) presented an extensive list of activities the instructor can use to encourage the learner to be autonomous in learning. The following are the tasks presented at the conference:

1. classifying                    categorizing according to semantic similarity
2. predicting                    anticipating one's own learning process
3. brainstorming                thinking of words and ideas in relation to topics and subjects
4. selective listening         listening for key words
5. personalizing                sharing his/her own opinions, feelings, and ideas about a given topic
6. scanning                    looking for specific information in a text quickly
7. conversational              using expressions to start conversations and keep them going
8. cooperating                working together to help each other
9. discovering                searching for language patterns
10. rehearsing                 practising tasks in given contexts
11. role playing                impersonating someone else in a given situation
12. inferencing                using background knowledge in new contexts
13. discriminating             differentiating between main and supporting ideas
14. diagramming                labeling a diagram using given information
15. using context              using a given context to predict the meaning of unknown words, phrases, concepts etc
16. concept mapping         describing the main ideas in the form of a map
17. summarizing                grasping the main ideas
18. self-evaluating            assessing one's own learning progress
19. taking notes                rephrasing the main ideas in one's own words
20. reflecting                 thinking about one's learning styles and the learning strategies that fit best

There are other tasks that the instructor can incorporate in his class activities such as discourse analysis, skimming, and so forth. These tasks can be applied to any material. The main point we'd like to stress is to give the learner ample opportunities to think about the way he learns the target language. As a result, learners may discover ways in which they can pursue their goals.

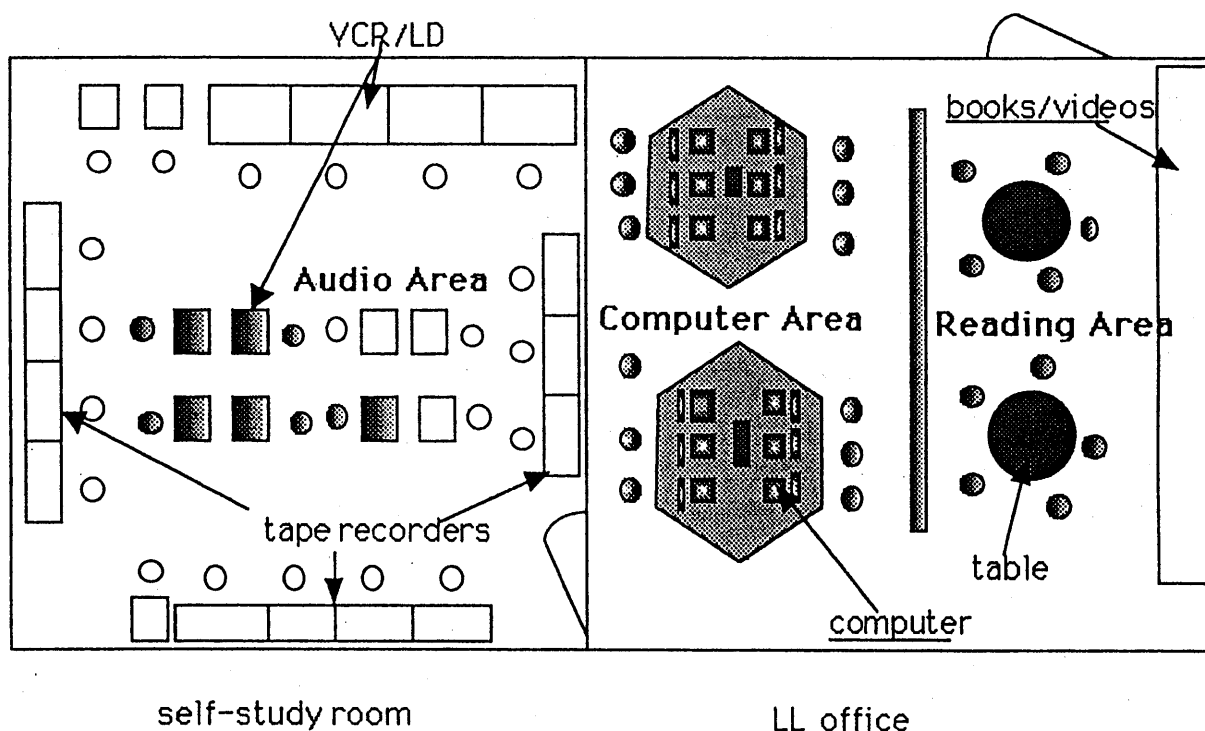
Concerning a self-access center, all the treasure in the world is of little use to the student who does not know how to find the map, let alone read it. The dilemma for self-access center managers is how to make a rich selection of materials available to the client community without overwhelming them. A number of presentations at the Hong Kong conference addressed the issue of database design. While some approaches emphasize practical issues, i.e. ease of use for learners and the flexibility of cross-referencing among various media in addressing particular learning tasks, some writers have challenged the purely practical approach. Benson(1994) notes that the reaction of users to highly organized systems is highly unpredictable, and that the provision of highly efficient information retrieval systems does not guarantee the development of learner autonomy. Though the design of self-access centers for specific communities will undoubtedly remain a complex issue for years to come, we believe such a center should include any combination of the following activities, but not necessarily be limited to them.

1. self-study with a variety of media:
  - reading for pleasure and information: books, magazines, etc.
  - reading/consultation of references: dictionaries, etc
  - reading/consultation of on-line text resources
  - writing for self-expression: free-writing diaries, etc.
  - collaborative writing/research projects, especially on-line
  - e-mail penpals/other person to person contact in the L2 outside the classroom
  - computer learning programs, games, simulations, etc. in the L2
  - audio-visual learning practice: audio/video/laserdisc,etc.
2. explicit efforts on the part of the learner to design his or her own program of self-study
3. counseling with resource persons and peers in the pursuit of self-study design feedback

Given the limitations of space and budget, it is difficult to establish an individual self-access center at MMU at present. However, we can make use of the available space in the LL office and the self-study room to incorporate the above ideas to set up a semi-self access center in the investigation of its efficacy and applicability for the target learner.

The following is a schematic representation of a proposed self-access center at MMU.

Fig. 2 PROPOSED SELF-ACCESS CENTER



\* The darkened areas indicate our proposed setting, while the others show the current layout.

As can be seen above, twelve computers can be set up in the room for individual studies. The book, video, and audio tapes are shelved at the side. We propose that the computers be networked, so that learners can not only work together but also communicate with anyone at an institute where the network system has been set up. If necessary, the learner can ask advice from the instructor through the use of the computers. In addition, five more VCR/LD devices can be added in the current self-study room for the learner.

As mentioned earlier, it is also important to provide ample computer software for the learners, so they can select the programs which best fit their learning goals and strategies. A control panel for the instructor can be established so that the instructor can offer advice if necessary. In addition, two staff members should always be available for the learner in case of inquiries. However, we are faced with several problems in order to fully adopt the autonomous language learning concept:

1. *lack of instruction hours* - each class is taught once a week, 90 minutes a period.
2. *lack of staff members* - since we are not equipped with a rich resource center, it is difficult to increase the instruction hours without extra staff members.
3. *lack of availability* - the LL labs are not available to the learner, and the video room is only available from 9 to 6.

The last problem can be solved with relative ease; however, the first two problems will be difficult for the English faculty members to solve. Nonetheless, the establishment of a self-access center will surely be one of the solutions to those questions.



The rationale for autonomy in language learning has been stated earlier, and we believe that the concept is worth pursuing for our students. Another issue we have to consider if we are to achieve our goal in fostering a sense of autonomy among the students is : *Is it really effective for our students?*

Several English faculty members are currently engaged in pilot studies using the available equipment to assess the efficacy of computer-assisted language learning. Furthermore, learning strategies have been taught in various classes and the results are encouraging. We are still in the trial and error stage given the fact that the university was founded only two years ago. However, we firmly believe that autonomy in language learning is a key to the development of the English curriculum. We hope that our students will come to recognize what language learning is, and learn how to study so that each student can continue to develop his or her English skills after graduation.

## FINAL COMMENTS

We have reported our findings on autonomy in language learning as presented at the conference in Hong Kong, and argued for some modifications in the current English curriculum. There are other important issues which were not dealt with here - student motivation and the issue of authenticity in teaching materials.

One of the most persistent problems that the instructor in Japan faces is the lack of motivation among the learners. The cause may stem from the learners' perceptions that no immediate relationship between foreign language learning and their daily lives can be found. It may also be a result of the fact that the current English education centers around the entrance examinations. In addition, we can't affirm that we, the university instructors, have really exhausted every possible means to help the student learn the necessary skills. However, the English curriculum in junior and senior high schools has gradually been modified to fit the needs of individuals in the internationalization of our society. Furthermore, many universities in Japan have made some modifications in the English curriculum, and established self-access centers to meet those needs. We firmly believe that our new university can take similar steps to help the students achieve their goals, and can assist the learner develop autonomy in language learning through an exploration of the ideas described here. That, in turn, will contribute to the activation of the learner's potentialities for language learning.

Another issue we would like to touch upon briefly is 'authenticity'. At the conference, Ken Willing (1994) and David Nunan (1994) both argued the case for authentic materials persuasively. Their point is that authentic practice is impossible without authentic materials. This is a rather difficult issue to be elaborated on in the present paper; however, we are currently collaborating with other English staff members in designing our own materials. We still have a long journey ahead in the pursuit of our goals. Nonetheless, we think that autonomy in language learning can be a step forward towards their achievement.

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