"Learner development" : what might it be?

What is "learner development"? And what's the point of devoting a special interest group to it within JALT? I'll try to address, if not fully answer these two questions in the suggestions which follow.

First, a rather zen-like response to the problem of definition : the term "learner development" hasn't been widely used before (in fact, we fondly supposed we'd coined it until we came across a mention of it recently in Sheerin (1989:34)), and this lack of "semantic baggage" might actually be quite liberating. In other words, defined negatively, "learner development" *isn't* a prepackaged formula of any kind, and instead seems to allow for a certain flexibility of interpretation.

Let's look at this in another way : if we'd called ourselves, for example, the "Learner Strategy Training N-SIG", we might have wound up drawing exclusive inspiration from that strand of empirical North American research which leads from the pioneering "Good Language Learner" studies of Rubin (1975) and Naiman et al. (1978) to more recent work in second language acquisition by, for example, O'Malley and Chamot (cf. 1990) or Oxford (cf. 1990). Such studies are of obvious value as a source of ideas for anyone interested in helping learners learn more effectively and/or autonomously, but, as a recent review (Rees-Miller, 1993) has implied, it might be unwise to swear uncritical allegiance to these ideas, given the dearth of evidence regarding what kinds of learner strategy training actually "make a difference" in practice. Also, as teachers, we'd probably do well not to ignore the European tradition of practical initiatives in developing "autonomous" or "self-directed" learning, independently of strategy research, as represented by, among others, the work of CRAPEL in France (cf. Riley, 1985) or Dickinson (1987).

How about the more generic "Learner Training", then, as a name for the N-SIG? One trouble with this is that certain approaches which might seem relevant to teachers interested in developing learners' ability to take control of their own learning (learner "autonomy" in Holec's (1985) sense of the term or "self-direction" in Dickinson (ibid.)) have developed or are developing their own separate traditions, and tend to be discussed in isolation from "learner training" per se. One could think here, perhaps, of certain aspects of Silent Way, Community Language Learning and other humanistic approaches, task-based teaching (including project work), syllabus negotiation, development of self-access arrangements and self-instructional materials in general, language awareness training or "consciousness-raising", communication strategy training, and training in study skills. The list can doubtless be extended, but the point here is that "learner training" may be too narrow as a conceptual framework for teachers wishing to pursue development of learner autonomy as an aim; instead, we may find value in seeking out and synthesizing insights from a wide variety of sources.

What, then, if we raised the aim of learner autonomy to the status of an N-SIG title, and called ourselves the "Learner Independence" N-SIG after our sister group in IATEFL? Problems arise here too, though, in that the North American tradition

referred to above appears to have developed more with the aim in mind of making learning more *effective* (by encouraging students to use the strategies employed by "good language learners") than of developing learner "autonomy". Though Wenden (cf. 1991), for one, sees no reason for conflict between the two emphases, we wanted to reserve a place in the N-SIG for those interested in learner strategy training (or other approaches) as a means of enabling more effective learning but not necessarily willing to accept a vision of learner "autonomy" as an overriding aim.

We chose "Learner Development" as the name of the N-SIG, then, precisely because of its relative obscurity and concomitant capacity to embrace and, we hope, enable synthesis of a wide range of hitherto separate interests. To summarize the above discussion, learner development as an *aim* could be construed as implying *both or either of* : (1) helping students "learn how to learn", and deploy what they've learned, as a route towards more effective language acquisition and use; and (2) weaning learners away from an attitude of teacher-dependence and towards an assumption of greater responsibility for and control of their own learning, as a means of more general empowerment. Within these broad approaches, learner development as a teacherly *activity* could, as suggested above, derive support from a wide range of possible sources, including : (1) research into learner strategies, styles and beliefs, both published and still to be shared or started; and/or (2) reports of practical initiatives in learner training, other kinds of relevant training (e.g. in study skills, language awareness or communication strategy use), syllabus negotiation, self-instruction, self-access, project work etc., and other springs of possible, as yet unchannelled inspiration.

As a forum for the discussion and practice-oriented synthesis of such resources, the Learner Development N-SIG finds one justification for its existence : partly, it will tend to be what's called in Japanese a "benkyoukai", or "study group", since, after all, there's a lot to study, and some of the background research, in particular, isn't easy to interpret for practical purposes. The proof of the learner development pudding, though, is ultimately in the eating, and - as a group of teachers - we should perhaps be particularly wary of allowing talk to become a replacement for action. Instead, we might be encouraged by Ellis's recent (1993:9) suggestion that "one of the ways in which knowledge and expertise can be built up is not through research but through teachers ..... trying to develop coherent programmes of learner training". We need to start thinking of ways to actually *implement* an enhanced degree of learner development for the benefit of our own students, and then, if we can extensively share both our practical successes and failures, in terms of syllabus, materials and methodology, the N-SIG will be playing a useful role as a kind of ongoing "touronkai" (or "teachers' forum") of benefit not only to ourselves and our own students, but to others elsewhere (since relatively little seems to have been done so far in the area of providing "material" - as opposed to theoretical - support for potential "learner developers"). The best source for practical ideas, then, may turn out to be the experience of other N-SIG members, though manuals or texts which do exist, such as those by Dickinson (1987), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Willing (1989), Oxford (1990) or Wenden (1991) are likely to be of help in starting us off on one of the "right tracks". And finally, once we've gone a certain way in implementing and evolving a variety of practical approaches, the N-SIG may come into its own as a "kenkyuukai" ("research group"), with a particular emphasis, perhaps, on objective

evaluation of the effectiveness of learner development in practice.

Finally, as a kind of appendix, I'd like to conclude with suggestions for two additional, perhaps less obvious sources of practical inspiration for the contents and methodology of learner development, one concerned with the teacher's own experience of learning, and the other with the experience that learners themselves bring to the classroom. Both of these relate to a second, rather more trendy reason for emphasizing "development' as opposed to "training" in the title of the N-SIG, namely that, by analogy with reasons for a recent shift in preferred usage from "teacher training" to "teacher development", the learner ("trainee") can't be considered an empty slate waiting to be written upon, nor is the teacher ("trainer") necessarily the fount of all wisdom where language learning is concerned, however well-versed in the literature!

Taking our status as "trainers" first, we might consider approaching the task of learner development with some humility in particular if we ourselves have learned a language as our L1 which we are teaching as L2, in other words if we have very little conscious recollection of ever having actually learned it (analogy : wouldn't you feel suspicious about being trained as a teacher (of a particular language) by someone who'd never taught (that language) before?). On the other hand, all teachers - in their guise as human beings - obviously do have a consciousness of "having learned", whether what they've learned be other subjects or skills, certain facets of the language they're teaching, or a second, third or fourth language. Delving into our own memories of both successful and unsuccessful learning, in particular of an "other" language, may produce insights which are useful for our students, and give us added credibility (and humility?) as "co-conspirators" with them in a shared experience. This is one potentially useful kind of "teacher-research", and we hope members will feel encouraged to publish some of their own introspections about language learning in the N-SIG newsletter, as well as applying them in their teaching.

Moving on to our learners, though, and what they can bring to the contents and methodology of learner development, here are two suggestions : one is that learners themselves may have good ideas if given chances to share them, the second is that if learner development isn't "learner-centred' and "negotiated" in other ways, too, we may risk alienation, not to say abject failure. Sheerin's (1989:34) view is that "learner development ..... should aim to offer alternatives and plant seeds, but not impose a particular way of operating on the student", and to this could be added that to know what seeds might grow we first have to "know the soil". Again, this is a question of teacher-research : finding out about the current learner styles, strategies and beliefs of *our* students, seen as individuals, and what is likely to be both useful and acceptable to *them* , rather than basing our training exclusively on research results or practices advertised as successful in other climes. In addition, the N-SIG surely has a unique role to play (again, as "kenkyuukai") in furthering rather more academic research into the learner styles, strategies and beliefs of Japanese students, or of learners of Japanese, and seeing whether the results of such studies replicate those in other contexts.

In conclusion, I think I've defined what "learner development" might be, and some ways in which the N-SIG could find a reason for its existence, but after all these are just ideas, and learner development in practice, as well as the mission of the N-SIG, will ultimately be defined by what we do, from now!

Note : This article originally appeared in a slightly different version under the title "Some thoughts on the formation of the Learner Development N-SIG", in the first issue of the Learner Development N-SIG newsletter, Learning Learning (1/1).

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