Autonomy or automatons? Freedom and control in language-learning techniques

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Self-directed learning, linguistic autonomy and authenticity

It is only recently, indeed perhaps as a result of the seminar to which this paper is a contribution that it has become clear that the term autonomy applied to learning methodology can refer to two quite distinct concepts. Dickinson[1] in his survey paper has distinguished $autonomy_1$ which is the general freedom on the part of the student to choose his own mode of learning and $autonomy_2$ which refers to a particular freedom in the mode of learning. In Dickinson's terms there exists the possibility of self-direction within which autonomy represents the option of total self-direction.

If one chooses to examine the concept of autonomy in the first sense, it is difficult to see how it can be justified as a methodology in language learning terms; since, by definition, the nature of the learning methodology cannot be stated, it is not possible to say anything significant about the methodological effect for language learning of such a position except perhaps in one respect. It is possible to develop an interesting discussion in terms of the psychology of learning and the relation of personality factors and affective variables to language learning achievement - everyone has experienced the learner who perversely insists on making his best progress by means of a mixture of overt grammatical rules and translation - but it is doubtful, given that such a line of argument takes no account of the nature of language or the sociology of the learning situation, whether such a discussion could lead to a justification of self-directed language learning.

Indeed it would appear that a justification, when one is offered which is rarely, would have to be in terms extrinsic to the methodological question. This seems essentially to be the position of the C.R.A.P.E.L. group. Whether, however, from a social-philosophic standpoint self- direction is desirable is clearly debatable. There is a vigorous 'de-schooling' literature which could be invoked to support the motion but one may predict that the experts of the Council of Europe in their search for common standards would tend to disagree; Trim[2] at least, has suggested as much.

For these reasons it seems advisable to restrict oneself to the more limited second version of autonomy. In this sense it is at least possible to elaborate a justification for it which relates to its value as a methodology for language learning, particularly for those students studying English in this country. That no one is surprised that such students no sooner arrive than they are closeted within the artificial confines of the English language classroom for anything up to six hours a day and thus effectively cut off during the overt learning process from the speech community whose language they have come to learn is itself surprising. This surely is a powerful argument for autonomy$_2$ as a method.

This is a particular case of a more general argument that can be advanced which runs approximately thus: the ultimate objective of language learning must be linguistic autonomy by which is meant the ability independently to cope with authentic language use. The student must be able both to make adequate sense of authentic rather than pedagogically controlled samples of the target language and to develop strategies for confronting the challenge of new language situations unaided. Indeed these are but two facets of the same problem since no teacher can ever exhaustively predict the language sample the student will have to handle and, in fact, it would be methodologically highly inefficient to attempt to do so. Consequently, if the ability to handle authentic discourse is the objective there is ultimately no alternative to developing the student's independence of the teacher.

As it stands this objective need not have any implications regarding

the level of approximation of the student's interlanguage. It is thus compatible with those approaches which favour the student's acquiring a restricted form of the language, nor does 'authentic' entail 'advanced'.

Impediments to autonomy: activity and adequacy

Such an objective, however, is generally seen as unrealistic since the learner tends to be viewed negatively. Almost by definition the learner is someone for whom this objective is not feasible and this thinking reveals itself in the common practice of grouping by 'level'. This has naturally lead to a conceptualisation of the learning process which positively excludes the possibility of autonomy as an objective and thus the reasoning becomes self-justifying.

This view is characteristically realised in practice through the determination of a sequenced language item syllabus justified, if at all, on psychological grounds. This is clearly questionable both in its own terms in that the theory is open to question and also because it has become increasingly evident that a purely psychological base is inadequate. This is not merely the competence - performance distinction in another guise but a question of the relative merit for applied linguistics of viewing language as an internally coherent system or as a social phenomenon. The two approaches are not, of course, incompatible. However, having accepted a psychologically determined item-sequence, there is little one can do but train for formal adequacy within the terms of the pre-determined syllabus. This in turn determines the nature of the activities that can take place in the classroom. This characterisation is substantiated when one considers the nature of most classroom discourse and the activities which give rise to it.

The peculiar nature of classroom discourse is becoming increasingly well documented and in collaboration with Clarence Shettlesworth I have attempted elsewhere to illustrate some of its distinctive features[3]. It seemed to us that the centrality of teaching materials bore a major responsibility for stimulating discourse of low transferability, that is, discourse inappropriate to the contexts of use relevant to the lessons we examined. Riley[4] in his

contribution to the present seminar makes a similar point in respect of the teacher's role.   Our conclusion was that the use of such materials increases the need for activities which create the conditions for transfer.

Whether such activities take place depends largely upon the manner in which the teacher conceptualises his task.   It is, I think, not unreasonable to suggest that in general teachers are constrained to view their task - indeed, have been taught to view it - as follows: to set the teaching objective in terms of what is feasible within, say, a fifty minute session; to reach that objective by structuring activities into a coherent pattern over the session; to extend such activities beyond the confines of the lesson period primarily by means of homework which is directed at the next lesson.   There are thus severe constraints on the nature of the activities that can take place and it is easy to see that teachers will normally perceive classwork and even extra-curricular activities as an end in themselves and as essentially teacher-directed.

For the student the result is that he is, in effect, limited to the practice achieved within the lesson and to the kinds of practice this structuring permits.   As a corollary of the way teachers perceive lessons the student naturally comes to perceive classwork as sufficient in itself for language learning and is happy to shift the responsibility for learning onto the teacher. The result is clearly to limit the possibility of the student acquiring autonomous learning strategies.   In short, such a view of language learning creates discourse of low transferability but fosters activities ill-adapted to encouraging transfer.

Of the limits to autonomy: the paradox of control

The view of the language learning process characterised above clearly has little to do with "the ability independently to cope with authentic language use" which is our determining principle.   Accepting it as such, it becomes the student's response to the contexts of authentic language use which determines the nature of the activities which take place.   This in turn determines the requirement for formal adequacy: we have now, I hope, replaced

the linguistic horse in front of the methodological cart and have, in passing, virtually provided a definition of a methodology for communicative competence.

This topic has recently been discussed by Morrow and Johnson[5] who argue strongly the case for developing fresh classroom techniques to match recent insights gained into syllabus design. Unless the implications of promising theoretical developments are translated into practice, classroom technique will continue uninfluenced and the effect of such new insights on the student's learning will be minimal. One could say that a drill is always boring. Morrow and Johnson are, of course, concerned that this could be the case with notional syllabuses but the point is of particular importance when autonomy becomes the overt goal of language learning. In accordance with our conceptualisation of the learning process the technique adopted must

1. realise natural contexts of language use in a viable form i.e., taking into account institutional and material constraints.

2. provide for the identification of the need for formal adequacy.

3. allow for the acquisition of formal adequacy to the extent determined under point two.

The fundamental design problem is thus to reconcile the conflicting requirements of these three criteria. In particular, and this is where traditional approaches have shown themselves to be at their weakest possibly because the problem is most acute (certainly we found it to be so), it is necessary to exercise the control over the structure of the activity demanded by the concept of adequacy without allowing such control to prejudice the naturalness of the context and hence the authenticity of the language. Activities appropriate to the latter naturally take the form of an on-going process and the demands made by the desire to achieve adequacy are rarely compatible with it. This 'paradox of control' we found to be the central problem. It is to be hoped that at least some of the considerations involved in finding a solution (or resolution) will become apparent in the following description and discussion of methods that have been used at the Centre for English Studies.

Steps to autonomy: a case study

Although the description that follows refers to principles that are implemented on the majority of our specialist courses, it is based in particular on our experience with a course devised for a group of Venezuelan postgraduate scholars, since they posed the problem of achieving autonomous language learning in an especially acute form.

1. their entry competence ranged from beginner to advanced; hence some degree of individualisation was necessary.

2. for those at the lower end of the range the time available would be barely adequate to ensure the possibility of postgraduate study in English; thus provision would have to be made for encouraging an autonomous and hence on-going approach to language learning.

3. postgraduate study is essentially an autonomous process and an element to orientate students in this direction was clearly desirable.

4. the fact that they would be studying in a diversity of specialised subjects meant that the ability to handle authentic examples of specialist discourse was an important requirement, particularly since the time available for prior planning of the course was severely limited.

The problems were thus considerable, though typical, and could perhaps be described as those of the unteachable in pursuit of the unreachable. Nevertheless, there were four activities through which we were able to introduce these students to 'natural contexts of language use'; these were

1. the exploitation of authentic materials drawn from the specialist fields of discourse.

2. the institution of guided study tutorial sessions.

3. simulation activities.

4. a programme of fieldwork projects.

Authentic materials

The use of authentic resource materials (ARMS) is clearly central to the problem of encouraging an autonomous approach to coping with genuine discourse on the student's part and has several advantages.[6] They motivate students by providing examples of relevant language. They permit the treatment of linguistic problems of genuine difficulty to students and not those identified by an intuitive a priori scheme. They oblige students to

employ interpretative skills which are crucial to autonomous learning. They can stimulate students to approach genuine textbooks or lectures far earlier than would normally be the case. In short, they gave our students the opportunity to practise handling the kind of material they would have on to their postgraduate courses.

We saw two principal ways of using authentic materials. They can be used as a repository of natural language use and exploited for purposes of exemplification. Secondly, they can be used to generate practice in relevant language skills acting as stimulus for note-taking, report-writing, oral summaries etc.

The paradox of control is illustrated quite elegantly by ARMS. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect lower level students to cope with the un-restricted nature of the language - although I feel we tend, in this country, to overlook that the students appear to survive outside the classroom reasonably successfully, despite the fact that the world is not composed solely of applied linguists - yet the normal manner in which control of dis-course is achieved, namely by structural and lexical simplification, is unacceptable. It is possible, however, to devise a grading which does not depend upon these usual criteria.

Firstly such materials can be graded according to accessibility, a complex and as yet unformalised criterion having to do with length of the passage, amount and complexity of clausal embedding, sophistication of in-formation content and presence of supportive elements such as diagrams and graphs. Secondly, it is possible to grade the complexity of the tasks required of the student and for which the material is the stimulus. It can range from the simple identification of a discrete grammatical point to providing an oral summary. Thirdly, the linguistic problems of the materials can be handled in a number of ways depending upon the object of the lesson and the level of the students. For some purposes it is preferable simply to ignore them or, equivalently, to provide a translation. At other times they can serve as the occasion for straight teaching, with the difference

that it is the students who identify the problems. Finally they can be exploited for practice in inductive techniques - and here one value of the rich context provided by authentic materials is seen - and in the referential skills the students naturally have recourse to when confronted with genuine discourse. It should also be remembered that in the context of LSP the familiarity to the student of the conceptual content often renders the language problems less daunting.

They do not, however, provide any principled introduction to language problems or suggest particular activities. It was thus necessary to devise a framework for language learning which would not become a limiting factor on the student's independent development. Consequently, classroom organisation and activity which, by virtue of their inherent structuring and the presuppositions with which both teachers and students approach them, tend to limit opportunities for the acquisition of autonomy required significant restructuring.

Guided Study Tutorials

One way in which this was done was by means of guided study tutorials in which the student selected a topic of personal academic interest, consulted relevant authentic sources and, at the end of the week, expounded his topic to the group. The tutorial thus acted as a study skill simulation exercise and a language clinic. The tutor was available to react to student's language problems rather than to predict them and as a final step in the tutorial sequence, where formal adequacy proved to present a significant communicative or generalisable problem, he would collaborate with the group to develop a remedial drill or guide students in the selection of practice material for independent study.

This was one way in which the problem of control was faced. In addition a gradation in the complexity of the tasks expected of the student could be established. Factors such as familiar versus unfamiliar topics, length of exposition and the explicitness of the steps leading to it were relevant.

A degree of control could also be exercised, through the written work pro-
duced as a by-product of this activity.

It may also prove possible to relate such activity to the student's L1
experience and overtly to treat the exercise as one involving transfer in
appropriate cases.   The degree of support provided by the native language
habits would then become an additional control measure.

Simulations

A further way in which language activities were structured to encourage
autonomy was by introducing simulation techniques.   The essential function
of a simulation exercise and its value for developing autonomy is that it
places the student in a situation making natural demands upon his competence
but where he will not suffer any unduly unfortunate consequences of his
mistakes.   Thus the opportunity is given for practice in a context which is
both realistic and stimulating yet at the same time areas of linguistic
difficulty can be identified naturally.   Finally, simulations provide highly
motivating activities and, assuming that the simulation actually runs, which
ideally is entirely the responsibility of the students, it can increase con-
fidence in the ability to operate in the target language.

It is thus clear that simulation exercises can provide the conditions
for autonomous practice; it is less obvious, however, how they can help to
secure the conditions for learning, at least without the imposition of a
stultifying structure upon the activity.   It is, of course, possible to
grade simulations by the level of complexity of the communicative demands
made upon the student and in this respect the problem was eased for us by the
exercises we used which were taken from a series published by ILEA Media
Resources Centre and range from a very simple introduction to gaming techniques
to the ability to present a complex argument in public.

There remains the problem of balancing the need for formal adequacy
against the requirements of the on-going autonomous nature of the activity.
The immediate solution was to record the session on video-tape which could
form the basis of intensive work at a later stage.

Fieldwork Projects

As a realisation of the argument developed earlier, it seemed merely logical that in order to encourage an autonomous approach to language learning in the face of authentic discourse, our students should be confronted in a principled way with genuine examples of language use with the option to draw upon a variety of supportive resources if required. A series of interviews and visits was arranged with organisations involved in fields of direct relevance to the students' interests. A framework for these interviews was provided in the form of an information-gathering project which achieved the aim of rationalising the language activity without distorting its authenticity; the kind and amount of information to be sought could be freely manipulated. The project could then be monitored in a number of ways; by means of a written report as follow-up; on occasion recordings were made in situ for intensive study later; the briefing and debriefing sessions could vary in scope and focus.

From one point of view this activity was highly successful insofar as those students who appreciated that in this way the major responsibility for learning was now theirs responded to the challenge well and devised autonomous strategies for coping with the situations. In some cases students made their own recordings for private study; in others the visit stimulated a mini-research project which the student followed through in consultation with the tutor. Such students, however, were in a definite minority which is illustrative of a major factor that has to be taken into consideration when attempting to implement techniques designed to encourage autonomy and which I shall comment upon in the following discussion.

Discussion

The problem common to all these techniques is that of the paradox of control. If traditional classroom activity along the lines described earlier encourages retention at the expense of transfer, the opposite tends to be the case with the activities described here. As a consequence of creating situations which stimulated realistic, highly transferable discourse, a

certain proportion of error arising out of the relatively unstructured - in the traditional sense - nature of the activity would have to be accepted unless a form of structuring could be devised which would allow a degree of control over the linguistic content to be exercised without prejudicing the autonomous nature of the activity.

Insofar as this control was achieved it was done, as we have seen, in two ways. Firstly by removing the focus on formal adequacy from the context of the activity by means of recordings, tutor observation and by using the activity as input to language improvement sessions rather than as an extension of them. Consequently the conditions for authentic discourse and student-directed activity still obtained and overt language work became a response to a perceived communicative need.

Secondly, a measure of control can be obtained by building into these activities elements which are amenable to control but consonant with the nature of the activity. This is often through the written work that these activities can stimulate naturally; the problem of achieving satisfactory control when dealing with spoken discourse was less amenable to an easy solution. The work, for example, arising from the viewing of a video-taped simulation could too often become little more than a random and fragmentary running commentary by the tutor.

Finally, the forms of control could be switched from the substance of the language to the degree of task complexity. This criterion is, of course, inherent to the contexts themselves and thus provides a natural means of grading which need not prejudice the authenticity of the discourse.

In addition to this fundamental design problem there also exists a practical problem which has as yet only been mentioned in passing. Whilst our students had initially little conception of the nature and extent of the problems involved in learning a language, they did have clear preconceptions about what constitutes a satisfactory language learning process. They tended to see it in terms of a unique methodology, teacher-centred and based upon traditional classroom interaction; it would not be unfair to describe

then as happiest within the secure framework of structural drills in the language laboratory. This is not an uncommon reaction and illustrates neatly the distinction between self-direction and autonomy. Acceptance of the former principle would in this case have entailed rejection of the latter which we did not consider feasible for the reasons given earlier in the description of the course parameters. There is, understandably, something traumatic, if not paradoxical, about having autonomy thrust upon one.

These experiments in technique thus highlighted an area of difficulty which is the object of continuing experimentation, namely the problem of securing learning in natural language contexts without prejudicing the nature of those contexts.

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