

Autonomy in Language Learning and the Language Centre of the University of Cambridge

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Abstract: The University of Cambridge is such an international university that all the students are from all over the world with hundreds of different languages. Some of the students might need to improve their English level to cater for their studying and living in this country. Some other students may be in need of learning some other languages for various reasons. The Language Centre was set up to support all the students of the University. But it is not only a teaching centre to teach languages by language teachers. It is rather a learning centre to encourage autonomy in language learning.

This paper discusses the concept of autonomy in language learning, followed by a brief introduction of the Language Centre of the University of Cambridge.

Keywords: autonomy; language centre of the University of Cambridge; evaluation criteria

INTRODUCTION

The concept of autonomy as it has developed in the field of language learning is complex and multifaceted. As stated in Esch (1996) that it is a concept which arises from a fundamentally optimistic view of man according to which learners are able to be in charge of their own learning. However, technological advances have changed the context within which language education takes place. Satellite communications and high-speed networks transform the way we think about communicating with students. In the domain of language education, access to foreign language input for learning is now normally available outside teaching institutions. This new culture sets knowledge which is reflected in the emergence of a new discursive world, with new functions such as advising, new roles such as helper, new activities such

as collaborative learning, and new tools such as "learning technology" --- all taking place in virtual environments.

The Language Centre of the University of Cambridge was established as an academic service in 1990. It was the first 'Language Learning Centre' instead of 'Language Teaching Centre' while it was set up.

In this paper, the concept of autonomy in language learning will firstly be discussed. Then the evaluation criteria of the Language Centre will be introduced from the founder of the Cambridge Language Centre. Lastly, an overview of the Cambridge Language Centre will be demonstrated.

AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Holec (1985) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. He stresses three

key components in this and other work:

1. a dual emphasis on the ability to carry out autonomous learning and on the learning structures that allow the possibility of developing and exercising that ability;

2. an insistence that autonomy can only be developed through the practice of self-directed learning;

3. a principle of full control by learners over decisions relating to their own learning and a concept of teaching or counseling as support.

Wenden (1991) defines autonomy in the following terms:

In effect, 'successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous.

In this formulation, the learner's behaviour is in itself a sufficient condition for autonomy.

Benson (1996) suggests that the issue of control lies at the centre of a critical approach to autonomy. It operates at three inter-related levels: control of the learning process, control of resources and control of language. He uses the word control in preference to responsibility because it places an emphasis on the right to autonomy.

Control of the management of the learning process is also at the centre of much of the current discussion on autonomy.

Control of resources is an issue raised by Brookfield (1993), who argues that an 'inauthentic, limited form of self-direction is evident when our efforts to develop ourselves as learners remain at the level of philosophical preferences because the resources needed for action are unavailable or denied to us'. In the context of language learning, control of resources could cover a diverse range of issues from native speaker vs. non-native speaker teachers to the content of textbooks and learning materials to issues of time

and workload.

Control of language comes close to what Candy (1988) calls 'subject matter autonomy' or the knowledge-based component of autonomy.

Benson (1996) concludes that learner autonomy and self-directed learning have been strongly associated with individualization and even isolation in learning, but the implications of a more critical version of autonomy are social. Greater learner control over the learning process, resources and language cannot be achieved by each individual acting alone according to his or her own preferences.

THE LANGUAGE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The University of Cambridge attracts thousands of students every year from all over the world. The students are selected both academically and linguistically to become a member of the University. Hence, they have been proved to have mastered English to certain level. But there exist so many types of mother tongues among the students. For various reasons, some students may hope to improve their English, while some other students may hope to learn some foreign languages.

The Cambridge Language Centre was set up to support the language requirement of the students. But it distinguished itself from the other language centres at that moment. It is not set up as a teaching centre for the purpose of just teaching various languages. Instead, it is a Learning Centre, which encourages the students to explore the languages by themselves. Further advice and support are available whenever needed.

FIVE EVALUATION CRITERIA OF THE LANGUAGE CENTRE

The following five criteria are proposed by the founder of the Language Centre of the University of Cambridge, Dr. Edith Esch (1996), for the evaluation of arrangements and the management of support systems, whether human resources or materials provi-

sion.

1. Choice, or the provision of genuine alternatives

The relevant question is: are alternatives provided to learners whenever possible? It must be a genuine choice for the learner, not a gimmick the aim of which is to make the learner fit into predetermined categories. At Cambridge, the resource centre provides traditional multimedia materials in over 100 languages, with a reference section, computer-assisted language learning, eleven languages available all day direct by satellite, and one four-hour video tape in each language received by satellite every night available for use the following day. Learning how to use the centre is done by means of introductory sessions, a users' guide and videotapes. Students can choose:

- a. whether they work on their own or with help (or attend classes in a number of languages);
- b. when and how often to come;
- c. whether they come on their own or with a friend;
- d. which language to study;
- e. which medium to use;
- f. which types of materials to start from (authentic or didactic);
- g. what activities to carry out;
- h. what kind of evaluation they wish to undergo (formal, informal, summative or formative).

The Centre provides rich and varied input for acquisition in a non-normative environment. There is a wide range of 'raw data' whether they are magazines or audio recordings or TV programmes direct by satellite. TV is a favourite with students, but it is good because it is a constant reminder not that foreign language are there simply to be learned but that there are whole communities of people out there who are sending out messages for interpretation.

Another aspect which contributes to a rich linguistic environment in the Centre is the fact that there are many languages available, the very existence of which are unknown to the average student.

Again, this serves as a constant reminder that there are hundreds of other linguistic communities in the world and by itself, this acts positively against ethnocentrism.

Thirdly, and this is perhaps the most important, the very range of materials implies a non-norm-oriented view of linguistic knowledge and language-learning methods. This non-normative approach relaxes rather than builds learners' anxieties concerning what they should do.

2. Flexibility

This criterion refers to the flexibility or rigidity of structures. Once a particular choice has been made, how easy is it to self-repair and to change options? The low-level trouble-shooting system in the Centre is a 'Square One Kit' in which all the information students need to have to use the resource centre is available. In particular, it includes a user's guide and all the factual information students need to use the system, so that at any point they can 'come back to Square One'.

3. Adaptability/Modifiability

This criterion addresses the capacity of the system to modify or change to suit the learning plans or strategies of different learners. A typical test of adaptability will be in the arrangement and classification of language learning resources, and in particular the extent to which categories for the description of materials are imposed on the learner.

Thesaurus construction within a self-access system addresses this problem of learner-relevant paradigm very precisely. The librarian of the Cambridge Language Centre is building up such a thesaurus. Briefly, it is a set of search terms meant to facilitate the process of browsing and to support the retrieval of materials. The process involves specifying the usage of terms, so that searching is itself a language-learning process. A thesaurus is an open-ended and dynamic tool --- which can eventually integrate the learners' own terms.

Modifiability is slightly different. It refers to the possibility for learners of transforming documents

and playing around with them. For example, one of the collaborative activities for the students to carry out is doing puzzles. These are entertaining at an advanced level mainly because they elicit talk that reveals which linguistic categories and strategies students are using when carrying out a task.

4. Reflectivity/Negotiability

This criterion refers to the ability of the system to provide means for learners to reflect and look back on their learning experience in a negotiated way through language. At Cambridge, there is a system aiming at individual learner support through the learning advisory service and another system for collective learner support through learner-training courses.

The learning advisory service was set up as an intelligent human interface available to users for face-to-face interaction. Its specific brief is to improve students' 'learning to learn' ability. It is a system of intervention which aims at supporting students' methodology of language learning by means of 'conversations', i.e. by using language in the framework of social interaction to help students reflect on their learning experience, identify inconsistencies or changes and steer their own path. An important aspect is that initial contact, which may be before or after using the self-access system, is normally on the initiative of the student. The adviser interacts with learners by means of interviews, orally (face to face or by telephone) or in writing (by letter or e-mail). The service is also a way of stating that 'learning by doing' is not enough. Learners require help in making explicit their methodology and their representations of the learning process.

Learner-training courses have a comparable function but they aim at groups of learners who have common learning needs. The idea is that students work together and reflect together on their language-learning experience with the help of an adviser. The courses are not advertised but offered to students who have come to see the adviser because they have difficulties in a particular area. This process of

self-selection is considered to be crucial. Students are written to and asked to commit themselves to come to the course, the aim of which, explicitly, is to help them learn to learn, not to learn a particular language. At the same time, whenever possible, the course is conducted via the medium of the target language. At the first meeting, the students learn to know each other and work out what their respective needs and priorities are. Students make all the decisions themselves. Intervention occurs only if requested. The tutor's role is to record what's going on, to help make sure that there is an agreed statement of what the plan is for the following session at the end, i.e. what activities are to be carried out with what intentions, and to distribute these 'minutes' at the beginning of the following session.

These courses have been remarkable for two reasons: first, although they are totally voluntary, participants tend to get hooked. Secondly, there is evidence that sharing the hands-on, task-based approach as a basis for reflection has increased students' understanding of categories for language learning activities such as 'listening' or language categories such as 'vocabulary'. As a result, their use of the resources and in particular of the catalogue is improved.

5. Shareability

This criterion refers to the ability of the system to provide means for learners to share activities and/or problems and difficulties with others. It is different from negotiability. The latter is fundamentally about negotiating meanings and change brought about by the learning experience. Shareability is both more 'convivial' and more linguistic. It has to do with doing things together, whether it is problem solving in relation to a complex task, planning a communicative task, or working out the correct pronunciation of a word and checking one's production.

At Cambridge, where over 60 languages are spoken by students at postgraduate level, there is a special arrangement supported by the advisory service to create supportive social conditions and networks by means of exchange pairs and pairing up of

students. The concept is twofold: there is a pedagogical aspect that students learning a second language, and particularly if they work in a technologically advanced environment, should have the possibility of anchoring their language learning in social relations. It can be with a native speaker of the target language, or it can be with another student who is learning the same language. It is both a kind of dating system which helps individuals find friends and a way of creating a network of learners who can share the experience of language learning. The other aspect is that it is one of the means which can help the acculturation of non-native speakers of English who are in the university community so it is a case where a shared experience is used explicitly and positively as a socially cohesive device.

SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THE LANGUAGE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The Language Centre was established as an academic service in 1990. The mission of the Language Centre is as follows:

1. Providing language learning opportunities for all members of the University and for the staff of the University.
2. Being responsible for taught courses within that context aimed at non-specialist language learners.
3. Supporting the teaching of languages in the various Faculties of the University.
4. Advising and assisting in the development of language teaching and learning appropriate to the needs of the various Faculties of the University.
5. Taking a proactive role in the application of new technology to the provision of opportunities for language learning in the University and colleges.

Independent learning is encouraged in the John Trim Centre. It provides 24 multimedia workstations, eight video viewing stations, some with DVD, and eight listening stations all of which can be used individually or in pairs for independent learning. Re-

sources are available in over 150 languages from beginners' to advanced level.

Direct satellite broadcasts are currently available daily in Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. These can be viewed from both the video stations and the multimedia workstations. Recordings of satellite programmes are made every week night, normally starting the news.

The computer assisted language learning programs available on the multimedia workstations are either installed on the Multimedia server or available on CD. There is a large collection of films in foreign languages, many of them with subtitles. Users can consult many language learning courses available in various media formats, as well as reference books, and directories and information about language courses, international summer schools, summer jobs abroad, and language bursaries and scholarships.

Language learning support from the Advising Team is available to offer advice on: starting a new language; brushing up on a language learned in the past; continuing a language at the current level; and also fine-tuning the language skills. The support is also offered to assist exploring the range of the resources and facilities in the Centre.

Conversation Exchange is a golden opportunity to practise the language one is learning with a native speaker. This scheme is a service offered by the Language Centre to promote interactive language learning and cross-cultural communication. The applicant is put in contact with a native speaker who wants to learn the other's native language. They arrange when, where, and how often to meet in the setting of their choice.

The language learners could make use of various Multimedia Workstation Resources in the John Trim Centre. There is language learning software installed including dictionaries. There is CD available for a wide number of languages. There are live television broadcasts in many languages. For example, for those who are learning Chinese, they may choose

Colloquial Chinese, Chinese Writing, Dictionary CD, or CCTV4 Satellite TV.

The Language Centre also provides various On-line Resources. It provides online language learning materials for all University of Cambridge users. The resources include audios, videos, text, images, interactive exercises, daily off-air recordings, and support materials for Language courses.

At the same time, students could also choose to follow the taught courses offered in the Language Centre. The courses are aimed at non-specialist language learners. The students attend the classroom teaching for a period of time, during which, they are provided the opportunity to use the on-line course-related material everyday. Thus, the students could learn by themselves at their own steps outside the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The Cambridge Language Centre is making use of all the resources available to facilitate students' language learning. From the Language Centre, the students learn not only the language they hope to learn, they also learn how to learn the language. The concept of autonomy in learning may also benefit their academic study in other fields.

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