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Increasing Learner Involvement in Course Management

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This article explores ways in which learners can be brought into a more central role in making decisions about the organization and direction of their language courses. As an introduction, a review of some of the arguments which support increasing learner involvement is presented. Constraints in introducing such involvement are then discussed, concentrating on learners' prior experiences and expectations, and it is argued that what is required is a gradual approach toward relinquishing the teacher's dominant role. This argument is taken up in a third section, where some materials and tasks are presented which are designed to bring about such a relinquishment.

In recent years, there has been considerable debate over the need for more learner-centered teaching approaches. For some, such approaches refer to the design of syllabuses and course materials that more accurately reflect the interests of learners and the situations in which those learners are likely to require use of the target language. In terms of this article, however, such approaches are not fully learner-centered since they still involve a person other than the learner determining what is to be learned and how. For that reason, the issue that is dealt with here is how we may encourage learners to take more control over the management of their own study both inside and outside the classroom. The role of the teacher would therefore be that of a *learning adviser* (i.e., someone who is experienced in the teaching/learning process) or a *knower* (i.e., someone who can provide a ready source of the language and, if necessary, can correct errors).

THE CASE FOR INCREASED LEARNER CONTROL

Among the many arguments in favor of allowing learners greater control in the management of language courses, the following are offered as an overview.

The "Risks" of Teacher Dominance

Teaching a language course involves making a large number of decisions concerning a wide variety of topics. These include determining which samples of the target language to present, how much guidance to offer, what the long term and short term teaching and learning goals should be, how evaluation should be handled, which methods and task types to implement, and what the general standards in both target language attainment and classroom behavior should be. According to Allwright (1978, 1981), the complexities involved in managing these areas and making these decisions necessarily entail a number of "risks" that can threaten to destroy the value of the classroom experience for the learner. For example, there is the danger that learners may feel "spoon-fed" if the language is broken down into too many minute parts; they may be demoralized by standards that are set too high or too low; they may be frustrated by an inappropriate pace or teaching direction; they may be made to feel dependent on the teacher for help or as a source of intelligible target language input; and they may be confused by inadequate, improvised explanations or by an inconsistent treatment of errors. These risks are so significant that

> if one person tries to cope with the very considerable complexities of managing everything that needs to happen in the classroom . . . [then] a serious weakening of the value of the classroom experience for the learners is virtually inevitable (Allwright 1978:105).

A teacher who assumes "direct and exclusive responsibility" for course management is, according to Allwright, "professionally irresponsible."

Similarly, Stevick (1976), using terms from Berne's (1964) theory of transactional analysis, argues that classroom activities often involve a Parent-Child relationship between the teacher and the learners, where the latter have abdicated their rights and responsibilities as Adults in the face of the teacher, who is always right. In this situation, any learning that takes place is more likely to be "defensive," as learners seek to protect themselves from the possibility of being exposed or embarrassed. But this learning has, for the most part, no depth; it is like a suit of armor and "is a burden, to be worn as little as possible and cast off entirely (i.e., forgotten) at the first safe opportunity" (Stevick 1976:110).

Involving learners more in the management of their courses might thus conceivably lead to a reduction of risks involved in conducting exclusively teacher-directed classes and, at the same time, could contribute to the development of a classroom atmosphere more conducive to deeper or, as Stevick terms it, "receptive" learning.

The Nature of Language Learning

Our understanding of the process of language learning is still far from complete. Some teachers and course designers have, however, tended to assume that there is a set route through the learning task, both in terms of linguistic content and teaching/learning methods. Yet, it seems reasonable to suggest that we should not expect every student to learn in the same way, at the same rate, or to have the same interests and abilities as everyone else. Rather, there may in fact be as many approaches to language learning as there are language learners. Seen in this light, the traditional teacher-led classroom can only be a partially successful arrangement. Since the content and organization of a lesson may not necessarily be appropriate for each individual learner, there is a possibility that such teacher-led classes may actually do more to hinder language learning than to facilitate it (see, for example, Krashen [1982:68-70] on how a grammatically sequenced course may obstruct language acquisition). For a more efficient and effective use of resources, therefore, learners need to be encouraged to share in managing the learning task. We need to move away from the teacher's "I think you need this" and more toward the learner's "I know I need this." Such a shift implies some kind of learner training, the issue discussed in the second half of this article.

Communication as a Goal and a Method

One of the most significant changes in English language teaching recently has been the movement toward so-called "communicative" approaches. In almost all cases this simply refers to the teaching of items of language use (functions/notions) rather than of language form (grammar) and to an increased amount of oral work. Breen and Candlin (1979, in press), however, argue that if our goal is to develop communicative skills, then our method should itself be communicative—that is, it should involve the exchange and negotiation of ideas and feelings about the learning process, with the teacher as co-participant, not dominant, in the group. The classroom, in this case, is no longer "a pale representation of some outside communicative reality" (1979:98) where learners are engaged in rehearsing for a performance at some later time and place. It offers instead an opportunity for "realistically motivated communication" as learners share their views about the learning process.

Motivation

Experiments conducted by Beach (1974) with tutorless groups of college students in psychology, and by Littlejohn (1982a; discussed

further in 1982b) with tutorless groups studying beginning Spanish, have found that small-group independent study can lead to increased motivation to learn. The evidence presented by Beach (based on observer reports) and by Littlejohn (based on participants' responses to a questionnaire) identify similar factors leading to this increased motivation. Participants felt free to speak, to make mistakes, and to contribute their own experiences, all of which gave them a feeling of being supported in their difficulties with learning. In contrast, the participants had often felt inhibited or intimidated in teacher-led classes, either by the presence of the teacher-expert or by the presence of other students with whom they were working in competition, rather than cooperation.

An increase in motivation was also reported by Fitz-Gibbon and Reay (1982) after conducting a slightly different, although related, experiment in an inner-city school in England. Prior to the experiment, in which 14-year-olds were involved in tutoring 11-year-olds in French, three quarters of all of the pupils reported hating the language and considered it "a useless subject" (1982:40). The pupils were asked to rank school subjects in terms of how much they liked them and, after the experiment, the researchers found "a statistically significant positive shift in the ranks assigned to French" (1982:42).

Quality and Quantity of Subject Matter Learned

According to Allwright, encouraging learners to become more involved in course management should bring about "a direct improvement in their language learning" since they would "take much more responsibility for identifying and repairing their errors" (1981:11). There appear to be few, if any, experiments that specifically test this claim in relation to language learning. Evidence available from other areas, however, is supportive of the belief that increased learner involvement leads to increased subject matter mastery. Beach, in the experiment noted above, reported "an increased ability to apply principles studied" (1974:198) and found that tutorless groups scored higher in a final achievement test than did tutor-led control groups. Similar results have been reported by Faw (described in Rogers 1969), Hovey (1973), and Webb and Grib (1967).

Other Desirable Effects

In addition to the gains described above, students who are more deeply involved in controlling their own learning characteristically develop in other ways as well. Beach found that tutorless groups showed "increased interpersonal skills, sense of responsibility for one's

growth and learning, improvements in critical thinking and lasting curiosity aroused by the learning" (1974:198). Similarly, Gruber and Weitman concluded that placing a major responsibility on the students for their own education could lead to "developing attitudes which result in the students' continuing search for knowledge after the formal experience is over" (1962, reported in Beach 1974:192).

It is interesting to note that some significant gains in this respect can be made in what would generally be termed educationally "difficult" circumstances. Williams (1930), in one of the earliest experiments with Self-Directed Learning, reported on a 6-month project with delinquent children in the United States. After administering pre- and post-tests, he concluded that

> a group of delinquent boys of varying ages and capacities will, if given the opportunity and supervision, improve more in educational age when left alone than they will under ordinary schoolroom conditions with formal instruction (1930:718).

While it may be the case that formal instruction today is quite different from what it was in 1930, it is worth recalling that Fitz-Gibbon and Reay's work in an inner-city school in England in 1982 (described above) also found gains among learners as a result of increasing learner involvement.

The case for involving learners more in the management of their courses thus seems quite compelling. It is, however, clear that we cannot simply abandon our learners—especially when they have taken a deliberate step in enrolling for a language class. Probably the greatest constraint in applying notions of learner control is the learners themselves, an issue to which we now turn.

CONSTRAINTS IN IMPLEMENTATION

There is a widespread belief that in order to learn one has to be taught. Learners normally place considerable expectations on the teacher to organize their exposure to the language and show them how to study. Such expectations reveal the existence of dominant assumptions about the most effective modes of learning, so we should not be surprised if learners view any attempt to involve them more in course management as either very threatening or irresponsible.

Part of such a reaction is, of course, quite understandable. Learners, not normally being called upon to think about the planning and implementation of a course, often have rather naive views about the nature of language and language learning. Our demanding that they take more control over course management might thus leave them

feeling exposed and uncertain. In setting up the teacherless Spanish groups noted above, typical initial comments of the students were "But we don't know how Spanish should be taught" and "How will we know if we're making mistakes?" (Littlejohn 1982a:5). Perhaps it is in situations such as these that the full force of Stevick's Parent-Child analysis can be seen.

However, in desiring that our learners assume more control, we are not demanding that they possess a specific body of knowledge, but rather some definite personal qualities. These may include the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to take risks, to study alone, and to suspend doubts. Interestingly, it is just these qualities that are said to be found in "good language learners" (see, for example, Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco 1977, Rubin 1975), which may partly explain why experiments with students who volunteer for small-group independent learning often prove so successful. Introducing such learner-centered approaches as a general course requirement would almost certainly bring different results. We need, therefore, to move very cautiously.

Given the difficulties involved and the general, if understandable, naiveté of learners in regard to issues of course management, we need to view any attempts at increasing learner involvement as a process involving the gradual and continual refinement of the learners' ability to perceive and manage the learning task. We should not, therefore, be so much interested in what learners say about the content and form of their course as in the process by which they arrive at their opinions. In terms of practical implementation, this seems to suggest the devising of open-ended tasks that stimulate learners to think more deeply about how their language course is being conducted and gradually to take a more meaningful role in directing its scope and method. It is the design of such tasks that now concerns us.

IDEAS FOR COURSE AND MATERIALS DESIGN

The ideas that are presented here stem from experiments carried out at the University College of Bahrain with two groups of Arab students with lower intermediate ability in English who, having failed the preparatory year, were required to repeat a semester in General English, six hours per week for 14 weeks. These students (24 in all) were generally considered to be lacking in motivation and had had little or no experience with communicative approaches or methods involving group work or pair work. They saw language learning as the study of grammar and vocabulary and the roles of teacher and learner as clearly separated. They were in no way specially selected for the purpose of the experiment.

Since the desire was to involve the students more in decisions concerning course conduct, it would have been inappropriate to draw up a linguistic syllabus (e.g., a list of structures/functions to be covered) prior to the commencement of the course. Clearly, however, some direction or focus was needed, particularly in the light of the learners' previous experience. The approach taken, therefore, was to devise a set of principles which classroom activities were to work toward fulfilling. From the points set out in support of more learner control, the following principles seemed to suggest themselves:

1. Language would be presented and experienced as "communicative behavior," not as an abstract system of formal rules.
2. The course would not only attend to the end-of-course *needs* of the students but also to their *wants* as they arose during the course (i.e., learning would proceed in a direction and at a pace appropriate for the learners).
3. The course would take as its starting point the prior experience of the students as language learners and as "communicators," and this experience would be mobilized and exploited in the classroom.
4. The course would seek to involve and interest the students and to maximize motivation.
5. The course would seek to develop self-sufficiency in the students (i.e., they would be encouraged to make their own decisions over what and how to learn and to identify and correct their errors).
6. The teacher would be "co-participant" and "co-communicator" in the group, seeking not to determine how to learn but to stimulate and advise.

In terms of practical implementation, it was decided that the course would consist of three components: Language Learning Workshops, which would be concerned with developing the students' awareness of the "what" and "how" of language learning; Formal Linguistic Input, concerned with the presentation and practice of linguistic knowledge, such as grammar, functions/notions, and vocabulary; and Activities, which would give the students greater experience in the range of possible classroom methods. Obviously, these components were not discrete categories, since any attempt to develop an awareness of the "what" and "how" of language learning would have to be carried out through some kind of "activity." These components, rather, reflected the concern that the students' progress toward exercising greater control should not be constrained by their lack of experience with possible ways of approaching language learning. The ideas that follow, therefore,

represent some of the tasks that were given to the students to widen their experience and gradually bring them into a more central role.[1]

MATERIALS AND TASKS

The Questionnaire

Why are you learning English?

How do you think English will be useful to you?

What do you think is the most difficult thing about learning English? Can you give precise examples?

What do you think you need to learn?

What do you think is the best way to learn? Why?
What do you li in th

This questionnaire was given to the students in the first session of the course. After briefly discussing the type of answers one could give, the teacher asked the students to complete it privately in English. Responses to each question were then compiled on the board and served as the basis for a general discussion. The purpose of the questionnaire was to demonstrate from the beginning that the students' experiences and opinions were to be drawn upon, and to encourage them to start considering the relevant issues.

Review of Previous Textbook

Look at each section of each unit that you have been assigned and try to fill in the table below:

Unit/ Section	What exactly does the section ask you to do?	How difficult is it? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very easy very difficult	
		Personally	Group Average

In this task the students were split into small groups, each being allotted sections of grammar work from their last textbook. They were then asked to examine each section in terms of what it required them to

[1] It should be noted that the purpose of these tasks was *not* to provide opportunities for practicing/communicating in the foreign language itself, although this, of course, may have been an added bonus.

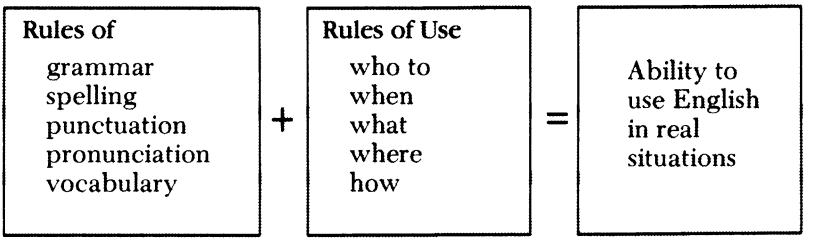
do and how difficult or easy they found it. This activity encouraged a considerable amount of discussion but, since the class was composed entirely of Arab students, the discussion was mainly in Arabic. This was not felt to be a problem, however, since demanding that the task be done in English would have prevented effective communication and defeated the purpose of the activity. The results of the group discussions were collected and a list of areas of grammar was drawn up in descending order of difficulty. An additional purpose of the activity was to give the students experience in working cooperatively without ongoing teacher direction.

Students as Teachers

Working from the list of grammar topics which was produced, the teacher asked for volunteers to research an area of grammar, present their findings to the group as a whole, and provide exercises, tasks, games, and other activities for practice. For this activity, the researchers were given advice and guidance and were provided with relevant reference texts (grammars, dictionaries, and other textbooks). Once in the class, however, the teacher sat among the students and only gave assistance when called upon to do so. The purpose of these activities was to encourage the students to listen to each other and to become involved in thinking more deeply about organizing their learning.

Sessions with a "student as teacher" had a characteristically more relaxed atmosphere than teacher-led sessions, and the students felt much freer to make mistakes, correct each other, and ask questions. Initially, the students showed a considerable range of abilities in leading such sessions, but, as the course progressed and they developed a clearer idea of what was expected, they became more expert in formulating their research findings and devising interesting and unusual practice activities. It was significant that in those sessions where the researchers clearly had not prepared sufficiently, the others in the class were, nevertheless, eager to contribute ideas.

Discussions about "Rules of Use"



After presenting the students with two different ways of making a request in Arabic, a discussion was started to encourage the students to think about factors that might influence the form of an utterance—for example, the roles of the speakers, the topic, and the situation. The purpose of this activity was to demonstrate that knowledge of a language not only consists of rules of grammar and related formal features but also of "rules of use"—illustrated by the plus symbol (+) in the above diagram. The conclusions of this discussion were referred to periodically as various functional items of English were introduced in the course (e.g., how to agree/disagree, ask for permission, and so forth).

Group Error Correction

Listen to the recording of your roleplay. Stop the tape every time you think you hear a mistake or have a problem understanding something. Discuss the mistake/problem in your group and then complete the table.

Mistake/Problem	It should have been like this:

The students were divided into small groups, each group being given a tape recorder in order to record their version of a roleplay. During the recording, students frequently stopped the tape and sought help from each other. As a follow-up to this activity, the groups were asked to listen to their recording, stop the tape where they thought they heard a mistake, and then discuss the correct form. The task sheet (above) was supplied to give them a focus. The purpose of this task was, once again, to encourage the students to make use of each other, drawing on the teacher only when necessary, and to think more deeply about the type of errors they typically made.

General Error Correction

In line with the purpose of the above task, the errors which students made in their homework were not corrected by the teacher. Instead, a mark was made only to show that there was a mistake, sometimes indicating the type (e.g., spelling, tense). Additionally, students were encouraged to exchange their homework and discuss it with each other.

Student-Directed Lessons

The introduction of student-directed lessons marked the final step toward learner control of course management. After approximately the eighth week of the course, when it was felt by the teacher that the students could profitably begin to organize themselves and draw upon their experiences with the tasks set out above, two of their six hours in English a week were designated as "student-directed." For this, the class was divided into groups of five or six, each group planning and carrying out its own learning activities together, with the teacher giving advice or correction only when called upon to do so. The remaining four teacher-led hours were used as an opportunity to continue to introduce students to other possible activities or approaches or to remind them of ones they had already experienced.

As specific preparation for this last step, the class had previously been divided into smaller groups and assigned the task of compiling a list of 1) all the activities they could remember having done in a language class (e.g., dictations, roleplays, listening comprehension activities), 2) all the activities they had found useful or enjoyable, and 3) their ideas about what they felt they wanted or needed to learn in English. These lists thus formed a ready source of ideas for their student-directed lessons. Once the groups had experienced a few sessions by themselves, a general discussion was initiated to consider the problems of learning without teacher direction. From this discussion, groups were encouraged to draw up their own set of rules or code of conduct for their student-directed lessons. Typically, the following rules were agreed upon:

1. Only speak English. Only speak another language if it is very necessary.
2. Help each other and correct each other's mistakes.
3. Only ask the teacher after you have asked the others in the group.
4. At each session, make a different person responsible for preparing something to bring to the next meeting.

In their groups, students carried out a full range of the methods and activities commonly used by a teacher (dictations, grammar, explanations, pair work, dialogue building, communication games, and so forth). The atmosphere in these lessons was, as noted before, very relaxed and open, and the students freely helped each other and explained points to each other. Whereas it had always been difficult to persuade the students to speak in English when the teacher was in full control, it was particularly noticeable that in these sessions English was spoken more frequently than Arabic. The students were also much more prepared to use reference books than they had previously been.

FINAL COMMENTS

From the remarks made throughout the description of the above tasks, it should be clear that the students responded very positively to a movement toward placing more control in their hands. For students who had been described as "very heavy going," they began to display considerable energy and enthusiasm for their student-directed lessons, the fruits of which became readily apparent. Three other traditional teacher-led groups were run simultaneously with students of the same type and ability who had similarly failed the preparatory year. At the end of the semester all students were required to re-take the examination they had failed the previous semester. On the average, the students in the experimental groups showed an improvement in their scores equal to or above that of the other students, confirming a point made by Beach that self-directed small group study "does not result in any decrement in subject matter mastery" (1974:197). Something, however, that the test did not (and could not) reveal is that these students had begun to develop skills and attitudes that went far beyond just the learning of English. The value of the approach lay particularly in the sense of responsibility that the students developed and in their subsequent change from a passive to an active role in the classroom. The requirements of the student-directed lessons brought the students into greater involvement with the course texts and stimulated them to take the initiative to look beyond those texts on their own.

It would, however, be incorrect to suggest that there were no difficulties in implementing the ideas presented in this article. The students, coming from a very traditional background in almost all respects, initially showed considerable resistance to or lack of comprehension of the purpose behind the tasks, uppermost in their minds being the examination which they knew they were to re-take. Students in the teacher-led classes could comfort themselves in the belief that the teacher was aware of the contents of the final examination and would therefore teach accordingly. Such comfort, however, gradually became unavailable to the students in the experimental groups as they were required to take more control over the form and content of the course. These students were, therefore, not only forced to work harder to discover facts about the language, but they were also required to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty about the relevance of those facts. Thus, although there was no noticeable decline in morale among these particular students, one can speculate that the conflict between a learner-centered approach, as described in this article, and a formal examination-based system could lead to student demoralization.

The argument put forward in this article has been that increased learner involvement in course management can offer benefits in terms of depth of learning, motivation, and attitude toward studying. It was noted, however, that learners' prior experience and expectations often make it difficult to introduce such a learner-centered approach. For this reason, one might expect that the ideas outlined here would prove more effective in cultures that place less emphasis on the authority of the teacher/leader and more on contributions by individuals. Similarly, one might also expect that the approach would be suitable for students who are already in tertiary education and thus, to some extent, experienced in self-directed study. Yet, the relative success of this experiment, given the background of the students involved, points to an interesting conclusion: that if adopted in a careful and gradual way, learner-centered approaches can offer significant gains among otherwise passive, teacher-dependent students.

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