

Self-access work and curriculum ideologies

ANDREW LITTLEJOHN

Introduction

In recent years, self-access work has become closely linked with promotion of autonomy in language learning. Self-access work is often seen as providing the opportunities for learners to make decisions over what they would like or need to study, exercise control over the rate at which they are working and assume greater responsibility for their own language development. While it is undoubtedly true that self-access work may contribute in this regard, I want in this chapter to suggest that we need to reflect further on the nature of self-access opportunities which are provided and the significance these may have in terms of curriculum ideology. I will be using the term 'curriculum ideology' in a broad sense to refer to the ideas implicit within the organization of the curriculum, in particular, the values and priorities upon which it is based and which it promotes, and the roles it allots to teachers, learners and educational administrators. I will suggest that much self-access work places learners in a reactive, disempowered position by virtue of the tasks which they typically do. I will also offer some brief suggestions on ways in which self-access work may be redefined such that it engages learners in a wider range of responses and draws them more into decisions affecting their own work. I will begin, however, by outlining some of the links which may exist between language pedagogy and curriculum ideology.

Classroom pedagogy and ideological encoding

In the literature on classroom pedagogy, one of the most interesting and revealing areas of debate has been the focus on the

relationship between classroom practice and ideological encoding, that is, the way in which classroom practice may carry or reflect a particular ideology. A number of writers in this area have suggested that there exists within much classroom practice a 'hidden curriculum' which promotes ideological messages that may not be immediately apparent to those involved. These messages emerge 'experientially', that is, they emerge through the learners' experience of the manner in which teaching and learning is organized, rather than through its overt content. Many of these writers adopt a position within critical theory, relating the practices of education to the social structure at large and seeing class-based ideas (values, goals and definitions of knowledge) and vested interests in the status quo reflected in the predominant modes of education (see, for example, Althusser, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1988).

Michael Apple (1985, 1988, 1989) has similarly applied critical theory to a detailed analysis of classroom procedures. In a fascinating account of the use of prepackaged boxed materials for the teaching and learning of science, Apple suggests that a process of social control is represented in the manner in which these materials provide detailed instructions to the teacher, specify the actual words to be used, and include all the material resources required (1985: pp.143-8). In utilizing the package as indicated, teachers, argues Apple, are *deskilled* in relation to curriculum decisions (in relation, for example, to decisions over what is to be learnt, how, with whom, when and so on) and *reskilled* in terms of techniques for managing pupils and shaping their behaviour to fulfil the goals set out by the materials. The impact of the materials is not, however, limited to the manner in which it deskills and reskills teachers. Much of the classroom work proposed by these types of materials is 'individualized' in the sense that it involves pupils working alone through the various levels or stages within the package. Knowledge and abilities are specified in the materials as discrete targets or 'skills' which pupils are to master or, more accurately, accumulate. Drawing on Gramsci's (1938/1971) work on the relationship between social practice, ideological encoding and consciousness, Apple sees this process of knowledge accumulation as reproducing a psychology at the heart of capitalist economies: that of the possessive individual (1988: p.153). In the curriculum packages which he describes, Apple sees this psychology reflected in the manner in

which knowledge and abilities are subdivided into atomistic 'bits' that are transformed into commodities for the pupil to amass.

The particular significance of the work of these theorists is that they suggest – in contrast to the popular notion of 'ideology' – that ideological encodings are present not only in *content* (semantic meanings) but more importantly in the manner in which teaching and learning is organized and the classroom *methodology* utilized. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Littlejohn and Windeatt, 1989; Littlejohn, 1992 and 1995), these encodings may be equally present in the organization of practices within language teaching. In fact, given the emphasis which the profession places on a developed 'methodology', one may argue that ideological encodings will be even more pervasive and more significant. The organization of language teaching, I have argued, may have direct implications for 'non-language learning' outcomes, in terms of classroom and social role relations which students learn, an experienced definition of what 'learning' is and how it is achieved and what constitutes 'knowledge' itself (Littlejohn and Windeatt, 1989: pp.159–68; Benson, 1994). By being positioned into particular relationships with teachers, for example, learners come to see what their role in the educational process is intended to be and in relation to other hierarchies of power, their rights and responsibilities. With the organization of language *learning* predominantly determined by those engaged with *teaching*, learners are additionally shown what constitute legitimate and valid ways of learning. As an integral part of this, a view of 'knowledge' is experienced by learners. Language, for example, may be broken down into 'bits' (grammar items, vocabulary lists, lists of functions, and so on) which the learners are to acquire as 'thing-like entities' with the human mind largely being viewed as an empty bucket. The learners are consequently placed in a passive or reactive role as they endeavour to accumulate these 'bits' of language knowledge presented to them in the processes of teaching.

With the potential for strong ideological messages within language pedagogy, an engagement with self-access work may be seen as having an important role in defining learners as more active agents in their own education. As the analysis by Apple and others has suggested, however, the decision to undertake self-access work is likely to be only part of the equation. What is probably of more importance is precisely what learners *do* in self-access work.

Self-access work and ideological encodings

While acknowledging that there is considerable diversity in the nature of self-access practices worldwide, I would like in this section to focus on what personal experience suggests is the predominant approach to the organization of self-access work. Readers may well find that this approach reflects their own experience of self-access.

Students may come to a self-access centre by a variety of means. They may be directed to go as a part of their course, perhaps earning credit for self-access attendance. They may be advised to attend (perhaps in the face of an examination), or they may choose to go themselves in order to improve their language skills in particular areas. The centre may be staffed by an 'adviser' of some kind who helps the student find and choose relevant materials to work on. In the centre itself, students are typically offered various 'banks' of exercises and tasks. These may be subdivided into various categories such as 'grammar', 'listening', 'speaking', 'learning to learn', 'business', 'topic' and so on, with indications of the language level required for each task. There may also be additional resources for extensive language work – such as video, literature, CD-ROM, and audio recordings. Typically, however, and especially at lower levels of competence in the foreign language, it is the exercises and tasks provided which form the main work which students do in the centre. These generally come from one of two sources: published materials (which are often cut up and pasted onto cards) and in-house materials, which result from the labours of particular teachers or materials producers.

In working with the provided materials, students may have the services of an adviser available. However, given a general shortage in counsellor time, the typical solution to helping students determine their learning needs and then plan accordingly, is to have answer keys available, such that the students may see for themselves the areas in which they need further language practice. Thus, there is a pressure on the designers and administrators of self-access centres to identify, particularly at lower language levels, exercise and task types which can easily be corrected by a student working alone. This in turn is likely to lead to the selection of 'closed', rather than 'open' task types. Given the predominant nature of much published materials, this is perhaps not surprising in those self-access centres which draw mainly on such materials. A similar situation is likely to

Input	Skill	Level	Exercise/activity
Source material (e.g. text, picture, tape, etc.)	Listening	Elementary	1. multiple choice
	Speaking	Intermediate	2. true/false
	Reading	Advanced	3. yes/no
	Writing		4. gap-filling
	Grammar		5. matching
	Pronunciation		6. listing
	(others)		7. sound discrimination
			8. shadow reading
			9. sequencing
			10. cloze exercises
			11. completion exercises
			12. parallel writing
			13. letter writing
			14. report writing
			15. composition writing
			16. simplification
			17. transformation exercises
			18. summary
			19. communicative activity
			20. open-ended questions (others)

Figure 12.1 'Ways of exploiting source material' (Lum and Brown, 1994: p.151)

exist, however, in those self-access centres which utilize in-house materials. Lum and Brown (1994), for example, in giving practical advice for the production of in-house self-access exercises and activities to exploit authentic materials, offer a system which eliminates 'pencil-chewing time' on the part of the materials writers through reference to a table summarizing possible exercise types (see Figure 12.1).

There is, of course, nothing extraordinary in the selection of tasks and activities listed in the figure. They reflect the most widespread task and activity-types used in language teaching – certainly among those found predominantly in published materials. Their reappearance in the context of self-access work is, nevertheless, significant since it gives us an indication of what students are likely to be called upon to *do* when working independently. Figure 12.1, then, deserves closer examination. I should stress that my intention

here is not to be critical of Lum and Brown's work. I merely wish to draw on the figure as an indicator of what self-access centres may typically contain.

In analysing language learning tasks, I frequently make use of three key questions that aim to reveal the underlying – ideological – subject position which is proposed for the student. These are related to the two areas of content and methodology. They are:

1. What role in the discourse is proposed for the learner: initiate, respond or none?
2. What mental operation is to be engaged?
3. Where does the content for the task come from? From within the task itself, from the teacher or from the students?

I will take each of the questions in turn and briefly comment on what I see as some significant points which emerge from an examination of Lum and Brown's table (Figure 12.1).

What role in the discourse is proposed for the learner?

In my analysis of tasks, I find it useful to draw on three basic categories in relation to discourse role: *initiate*, *respond* and *none*. 'None' relates to a situation where the learners are not expected to enter into the structuring of the discourse – simply to attend to what is being presented to them, as, for example, in the presentation of a grammar rule. 'Respond' I use in a particular sense to refer to a situation in which learners are expected to express themselves using language which has been pre-defined (such as in guided writing tasks). 'Initiate' refers to a situation which contains no such constraints or supports – where learners can say what they wish to say without any kind of underlying 'script'. 'Respond' and 'initiate' thus lie at end points on a scale of learner contribution, where at one end the learners have no control over what they are to say and, at the other, they have full control. Tasks can therefore be analysed as being more towards the 'respond' role or more towards the 'initiate' role.

As inspection of Figure 12.1 shows, the listed exercise and activity types generally appear to place the learner more towards a 'respond' position. Multiple choice, true/false, gap-filling, matching, sequencing, completion exercises, parallel writing and so on require students simply to respond and to do so within the specified confines of the task. A notable exception to this is 'open-ended questions'

(item 20), and possibly 'communicative activity' (item 19) (though this may imply a scripted information-gap type activity).

What mental operation is to be engaged?

Inspection of Figure 12.1 once again suggests certain conclusions. True/false tasks, gap-filling, matching, parallel writing, transformation exercises and many other items in the figure are likely to involve the students in a fairly narrow range of mental operations – principally what one may term 'low level' operations of memory retrieval, decoding semantic meaning, repeating, and applying patterned rules which require relatively little cognitive effort. While such mental operations are an essential ingredient in second language learning, it is apparent that the more demanding 'high level' mental operations such as speculating, analysing, hypothesizing, critiquing, and reflecting, appear to be absent, as are any which call upon the affective side of the learner – imagining, reacting, philosophizing, appreciating, and other expressive responses. The learner is thus positioned into a fairly limited range of response, and not invited – or required – to engage in learning in a deep sense.

Where does the content come from: the task, the teacher or the students?

Figure 12.1 is suggestive of particular content sources. Task and activity types such as multiple choice, true/false, yes/no, gap-filling, matching, and so on suggest that the learner will be called upon to work with content supplied in the context of the task. This is in turn likely to signify that the learners are to engage in essentially *reproductive* rather than creative language use. They will be required to reproduce the language which is contained (or hidden) within the task. They will thus be predominantly engaged in finding pre-determined answers, rather than unique ones. Tasks which require students to supply their own content – to work *creatively* with language – appear less frequently. Items 19 and 20 appear, in this regard, as exceptions, as potentially do items 13 'letter writing', 14 'report writing' and 15 'composition writing'.

The key concepts that come through very strongly in looking at Figure 12.1 and the list of task and activity types are the notions of 'scripting' of the language to be used by the learners, a demand

for 'low level' cognitive work which is affectively neutral and an emphasis on 'reproductive' language work. The potential for *self-expression*, *self-development* and for the development of autonomy in language *use* is thus under-exploited. In ideological terms, there is, thus, a clear tension apparent here in the ostensible aim in the provision of self-access facilities and its realization in practice. The notions of personally appropriate language work, of personal control, and self-direction *may* be involved at the level of the decision to enter into self-access work, but once this decision is taken the role which the learner then goes on to take is strongly suggested by the closed nature of the tasks which are provided and the existence of 'correct answers'. Thus, an intention on the part of many teachers for self-access work to 'liberate' the learner, is accommodated into social reproduction, a process in which the student now becomes *individually* and, more immediately, engaged.

The resulting challenge for those engaged in organizing self-access work is substantial. A considerable amount of careful discussion and creative imagination will be needed to identify ways in which self-access work can place students in a more determining position in learning, and engage and develop the *individual* rather than the mass anonymous learner. In the last part of this chapter, I would like to offer some general indications of the kind of changes in the organization of self-access work which I feel would move in this direction.

Redefining self-access work

Part of the origin of the dilemma for self-access work which I have identified lies in the extension of conventional ideological relationships encoded in language teaching practices to the development of self-access centres. The intention in providing self-access work is most usually seen in language pedagogic terms – that is, to get more language learnt more efficiently. Thus, as Benson (1994) points out, much of the existing literature on self-access focuses on *how* self-access can be organized (evidenced by the Lum and Brown extract above) – what he terms 'practical self-access' – without much detailed consideration of the underlying philosophies involved or a macro-sociological view of educational processes. It is as if the notion of self-access work has no significance beyond the

walls of the language teaching institution or in other areas of the learners lives.

Language teaching – like any area of education – is, however, a highly political activity. It is political in many aspects: in the status and impact of the language it promotes, in the culture it carries and – as I have been endeavouring to show in this chapter – in the manner in which it positions learners in their relations with learning, teaching, and themselves. It is this latter aspect which I believe needs to be thought through more carefully such that the subject positions ascribed to learners in self-access work complement the ostensible aim. My discussion of the task and activity types frequently offered in self-access work, and the manner in which the learner is viewed as a discrete ‘learning entity’ will, perhaps, have suggested a number of avenues for development. I would like here to briefly draw some of these together in terms of practical implications.

From ‘reproductive’ work to ‘creative’ work, from ‘respond’ roles to ‘initiate’ roles

I have argued in this chapter that one of the determining factors in the role allotted to students in self-access work is the nature of the tasks on which they work. In attempting to open up opportunities for autonomy in language use and self-direction in learning, one of the most important elements will therefore be a reorientation in task and activity types from a predominantly ‘respond’ learner role and ‘reproductive’ work towards an ‘initiate’ role and ‘creative’ work. This suggests the provision of open-ended (rather than closed) task and activity types, which call upon the unique experiences, imagination and ideas of the learner and which utilize these as content for tasks. At lower levels of ability in the foreign language, this will clearly call for a reconsideration of the extent to which opportunities for language learning need, in any case, to involve tightly controlled exposure to the language and controlled practice. At all levels of language ability, however, it raises for consideration how far direct, explicit feedback needs to be given to students in self-access mode by the teaching institution, or whether the provision of *example* answers to a task (in contrast to the conventional ‘correct answers’) and the possibility of peer feedback is a viable alternative.

Learner feedback: evaluating self-access work

Much of the nature of self-access work is partly dependent on the fact that it is often seen as an extension of classroom work and thus carries many of the ideological encodings of conventional classroom relationships. In terms of altering the balance of decision-making and power in self-access work, we can thus look to some recent innovations in bases for course design. One of the most interesting of these has been the work in the area of process syllabuses proposed by writers such as Breen (1984, 1987). Process syllabuses focus on negotiation between teachers and learners as a means of establishing what will be done in the classroom and how. To facilitate joint decision making, Breen (1984) suggests an 'index' or 'bank' of alternative activities and tasks. There are clear parallels between this 'bank' and the provision of self-access work but the significant point in process syllabuses is that the nature of the tasks and activities, as well as the choices that are made, are subject to on-going review and evaluation by the participants themselves (Breen, 1989). In some self-access centres, this principle has already been applied with the establishment of procedures for collecting reactions from users of the centre. Evaluation and response forms attached to worksheets and task/activity packs enable greater account to be taken of users' experiences, suggestions and difficulties. There would seem to be much one could do in this respect, however, by involving centre users in not only feeding back on what is provided, but also in planning what the centre offers and how it is organized. Such moves would help to transform learners from the role of *consumers* to the role of *producers*, exercising some level of control and influence over the centre facilities.

Learner feedback: producing self-access resources

The notion of a transformation of learner role from *consumer* to *producer* is also applicable to the production of materials in the centre. As Lum and Brown's table (Figure 12.1) shows, the production of tasks and activities for self-access work can be accomplished relatively simply through reference to a list of task/activity types. In recent years, I have experimented, particularly with adolescents, in engaging learners in devising their own practice exercises or devising exercises for others to do. In addition to the strong applied

linguistic arguments in support of this (exercise production engages learners in a deeper understanding of the language, can raise motivation and diversifies learning strategies), there are powerful arguments related to the construction of the learner as an *active* agent in the learner process, not simply the recipient of teaching. Such an approach could also be applied relatively easily to the production of self-access tasks and activities with which learners could be involved (and which could use content supplied by the learners – for example, texts they write, magazine articles, video and audio recordings either pre-produced or produced by groups of learners). There are obviously practical considerations here (related to checking materials produced, organizing and indexing tasks and activities) but the benefits in terms of a redefinition of the role of centre users would appear to be substantial.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavoured to show how the role which is allotted to those engaged in self-access work can be seen as fundamentally *ideological* in nature. As I have argued, typically learners using self-access centres are placed in a role in which their language production is scripted and in which they are required to focus on reproducing language supplied to them. I have suggested that there may be a direct conflict here between the ostensible aims of self-access and its realization in practice. The nature of this conflict and its resolution raises a number of issues both for the debate on learner independence and self-access and for the debate on language teaching procedures as a whole.