

# Individualization of study and self-instruction

Autor(en): **Bennett, T.J.A.**

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## Individualization of Study and Self-Instruction

At the recent colloquium on the language laboratory organised by the Commission Interuniversitaire Suisse de Linguistique Appliquée, the expressions "individualisation of study" and "self-instruction" were often used, or the concepts often implied, without any clear definition of what was meant, how the two differed, or what the relative merits of each were. This article is an attempt to rectify this omission, and to launch a discussion and reflection on these topics, which the colloquium did not have time to cover.

By "individualisation of study" is meant the adaptation of teaching methods and materials to suit a specific purpose, namely teaching a subject (in this case a language) to a given group or individual. It can operate at various levels, from a country down to a single individual, e.g. one could be said to be individualising materials if one adapted them to suit the circumstances of teaching in, say, Upper Volta, where the social content of a European course would be foreign and therefore meaningless to much of the population. On this level, too, one is individualising the content of the course when one includes special practice of points that one knows, say, German-speaking students will have difficulty in understanding or assimilating. If one moves down from countries to regions, the possibilities for individualisation are numerous, too, e.g. in Switzerland, where there are four national languages, it is obvious that materials and methods need adaptation according to the region where they will be used. Also, one could envisage different approaches and contents in courses destined for students in rural as opposed to urban areas. Moving down to the level of the city or town, individualisation can still be envisaged in much the same ways and for much the same reasons as previously suggested, e.g. at the colloquium it was mentioned that 'collège' students in Geneva have a certain opinion of themselves and of what interests them, so they require a quite different approach and content of study from students at a similar level in, say, Solothurn. Similarly, as different classes have different collective personalities, it is quite possible that teaching could be individualised in various ways from class to class.

Ultimately, one arrives, via the group within the class, at the smallest unit for which individualisation can be carried out, namely the individual student; I shall call this "personalisation". Naturally, it is on this level that teacher-based education is least able to take full advantage of the possibilities of true personalisation, for obvious reasons, such as the numbers of students in the class, the limited time at the teacher's disposal, etc. It is certainly partially true to say that, whereas at all other levels the presence of the teacher favours and is indeed necessary for individualisation, at the level of

the individual in the average educational group, the presence of the teacher is to a certain extent an impediment to the ultimate individualisation (i.e. personalisation) of study. Thus, there is here, a partial mutual exclusion of the two elements (teacher and individualisation) which does not exist at other levels.

In the deliberations of the Neuchâtel colloquium, it seemed that "individualisation" was used mostly in the sense of "personalisation", although this was never explicitly stated. In this sense, it has been carried to its logical conclusion, but such a concept raises difficulties for the language teacher, indeed for all teachers. Members of the teaching profession have usually expected and been expected to *teach* i.e. to impart information or ideas, to stimulate thought, to guide activity along useful channels, generally to supervise the learning process, but if one carries individualisation to its logical conclusion, one is forced to ask whether the teacher can possibly continue in his traditional rôle, since by so doing, he is not helping the student to truly personalise his work.

Other difficulties also arise for the teacher in primary or secondary schools: he is morally and legally responsible for the education of the children entrusted to him, and it is far from irrelevant to ask whether he is entitled, in the name of a principle (personalisation), to put the children's education (or his job) at risk. This point was raised at Neuchâtel, but delegates from universities often failed to appreciate that their own position was in fact quite different in nearly all respects from that of school teachers; however, it is obvious, for example, that university students are not in compulsory education, that the instructors are not *in loco parentis*, that a certain degree of interest and motivation can be presumed, that time limits are generally not so strict, that the student has fewer subjects to study than the school pupil, etc., etc. This difficulty for the teacher is then due to his pupils' age. Whereas one can with some justification expect a university student to work correctly, sensibly and usefully, it is far less clear to what extent one can expect the same of a secondary school pupil, even less of a primary school pupil, who has not had time to develop a mature approach to work. Despite the experiences of A. S. Neill and other extraordinary educators, it would be irresponsibly optimistic to assume that primary school children, or even more than a few secondary school children, would really benefit from true personalisation of study, which ultimately means self-instruction, but we shall return to this question shortly.

Another difficulty for the school-teacher lies in the nature of the class and his responsibility for it. He has to attempt to bring as many of the pupils as possible to a certain minimum standard, to ensure that they all have this basic knowledge in common. This is generally done by his teaching the class as a

more-or-less homogeneous group, an activity which denies the possibility of much personalisation. If he wishes to achieve the latter, the teacher must fragment the class, and can no longer be sure that all the pupils will have (even in theory) a common grounding in his subject.

Individualisation of study has at all levels, from a country down to the class and perhaps even to the individual, two clear advantages. Firstly, by accepting that different learners have different needs, it is taking the learners as the starting-point for the whole educational process. This willingness to adapt materials and methods to the learners, and refusal to force the opposite adaptation, should bring about optimum progress in study, since it should eliminate haphazard learning and some time-wasting; as materials will be so constructed as to counter interference from the mother tongue, more time will be allotted to areas which it is known will create difficulties for the learners in question, etc. e.g. for learners of French mother tongue it will be necessary to study the English "genitive" with more care and attention than for certain other learners.

Secondly, the adaptation of materials and methods to the learners can only help to create the right attitude in the learners as far as the language being studied is concerned. The effect is both positive in the sense that a favourable attitude is created and what might be called "non-negative" in that it can help to avoid manifestations of national prejudices, and misconceptions (e.g. the French all eat frogs! ) which are naturally counter-productive.

In all but the narrowest meaning, individualisation of study has, of course been practised for a long time by any good language teacher, so it need hardly detain us longer, since the case in its favour is clear.

In the meaning of "personalisation", however, individualisation is quite new, at least within the context of compulsory education; outside this context, it is not at all new. In universities for instance, at least the older British ones, teaching has long been on an individual basis (in the form of tutorials), although it has generally been directed to a certain extent by the student's tutor, not shaped totally by the student himself. A large amount of university education is self-instruction rather than instruction by a teacher, and, when carried to its logical conclusion, individualisation on the truly individual level, generally means precisely that: self-instruction. Of course the latter is only possible to the extent that the teacher retires from his rôle to one that might be described as "guardian angel", or even more accurately, "observer".

It is not difficult to imagine the crisis that such an upsetting of the teacher's traditional rôle must inevitably engender in the teaching profession, or some of the motives for such a reaction. The teacher sees himself demoted from his central position to a peripheral one, which must be a blow for his

pride, but he may have other, less egocentric reasons, to which we shall return later, when we discuss the disadvantages and limitations of self-instruction.

Since a degree of controlled self-instruction has been fashionable in primary and secondary schools in England and America for some time now, one may wonder why language teachers are suddenly so concerned with the subject. The answer must lie in the latest weapon in the language teacher's armoury, the language laboratory. Even as originally conceived, it cried out for individual use at an individual pace, and this was counted as one of its merits, although this potential has been relatively little exploited in schools, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are the teacher-centred approach to learning and timetabling problems. Now that the trend in language laboratory design is away from fixed installations ("matériel lourd") towards more mobile systems ("matériel léger"), often without monitoring facilities, and ultimately towards individual, portable language-laboratory-type cassette recorders, the issue of individualisation, in the sense of self-instruction is more difficult to evade. W. A. Bennett, in his stimulating paper "Constraints on the Effectiveness of the Language Laboratory", which was a working document for the Neuchâtel colloquium, suggested that the verb "teach" should be understood in the sense of "provision of arrangements for learning". In this context, the language laboratory is clearly the basis for a real switch of language learning to a self-instructional basis.

The advantages of self-instruction in foreign languages are various, and include firstly the psychological value of the freedom given to the student to determine what he studies and at what speed. Naturally, the programme is not infinitely flexible, since it would be useless to launch into a study of the French subjunctive without having first studied the other tenses of French; nonetheless, this freedom to advance at a pace the student feels appropriate ought to yield dividends, as ought the psychological effect of taking responsibility for his course of instruction, since he knows that, if he fails, he cannot blame the teacher.

Secondly, self-instruction relieves the teacher (does the word cease to be appropriate, in fact? ) of the burden of teaching and preparation for teaching, in the traditional sense. He is thus free to turn his attention to the many other problems and activities created by a switch to such different methods, including construction of courses, observation of students' progress, counselling of students, etc. Consequently, it is not necessarily the case that such a switch would increase the burden on teachers or quadruple the number of staff required (although, equally, it is not necessarily the case that it would not).

Thirdly, such a total absorption of the student into the learning process as occurs in self-instruction should also help to give the learner significant

insights into the learning process. This will enable him to learn more effectively and thus to use his time more efficiently. Also, such insights would be useful if the student later wished to "teach"!

Fourthly, as a generality, the advantages of individualisation in the wide sense apply to self-instruction, or *ought* to apply.

Fifthly, if it is properly and conscientiously employed, self-instruction in languages should, together with constant re-evaluation of materials used by the students, lead to gradual improvement of the materials available to the learner. This improvement can be of any kind: re-structuring, better semantic or structural grading, better explanation and practice of certain points, etc. Such gradual polishing of the learning materials would be more or less compulsory, since they are all the student has to lean on.

A well-designed self-instructional course must begin by "tuning" the student to the language that he is beginning to study, otherwise incorrect identification of the phonemes of the foreign language with those in the student's native language may occur with possibly disastrous results for his future study of the language; it is essential that this should be done at the beginning because, as is well known, it is much more difficult to unlearn a faulty performance and subsequently learn the correct one than it was to learn the faulty one. Thus the teaching materials should provide systematic practice in the phonemes, intonation, etc. of the language, and the monitor should be particularly careful to intervene if he is aware that the student is making a serious mistake.

Another desirable feature of a self-instructional language course is that it shall be carefully structured with regard to syntax taught, and that the syntax and vocabulary should be appropriately graded in view of the aim of the course (general or technical); while economic English, for example, is only one of many of the registers of English as a whole, and uses much of the 'common core' of the language, it nonetheless requires practice of the appropriate specific vocabulary and linguistic forms.

It is also clear that, if the instruction is to be really personal and individual, the materials made available to the student must provide sufficient data and examples presented in such a way as to avoid the need for him to ask for help. Explanations must, therefore, be clear and unambiguous, and when examples are given, they should not use new words. It is clear to my mind that, in the case of self-instructional courses, considerable auxiliary written materials are necessary from very early on (especially with students over, say, 16 years of age) as a reinforcement to replace work that the teacher might require of them in a more formal learning context. There will, admittedly be a danger that every contact with the written form will corrupt the student's pronunciation, but I think the advantages of early use of written

work far outweigh this danger, here; its greatest advantage is that it is easily accessible at any time and in any place (e.g. on the bus, in a coffee bar) in a way that a cassette recording is not; moreover many people find that writing something down enhances their ability to remember it.

Another very important element in a self-instructional programme is a battery of tests to enable the student (and counsellor/monitor) to know that he has reached the requisite level for whatever stage he may be at in the course. This is especially necessary as it is usually essential to master one unit of instruction before proceeding to the next. Moreover, testing helps the student to identify his weaknesses, so that he can eliminate them by revision or more intensive work in those areas identified by the tests as being below standard.

The importance of adequate review and testing material cannot be over-emphasised, as the key to progress in self-instruction must be orderly progress. Also, the more carefully the course is programmed, the more necessary it becomes to assimilate properly everything that is presented; failure to do so can cause considerable difficulties and frustration, both unproductive from all points of view.

Self-instruction being a solitary process, it seems to me essential to provide, almost as a compulsory complement, opportunities for the students to use the language that they are acquiring, and to do so in a more natural, more social context than the language laboratory. Facilities should ideally be provided by a native speaker, and should, as far as possible, provoke a desire on the student's part to communicate with other human beings via the medium of the language that he is studying.

So far, we have discussed self-instruction in a vacuum, but, if it is a teaching/learning strategy, it must be seen in its various uses in language-learning.

Clearly, at a university level self-instruction is a viable and justifiable approach. The students are intelligent, motivated (to a degree), and have widely differing needs, ranging from practice in colloquial English or English suprasegmental patterns for the English specialist at, say, a French university to economic English for the French speaking student from the Economics faculty of the same university. In this context, clearly, a wholly individualised approach is the best, and self-instruction is the most logical way of achieving it.

However, if one considers primary and secondary education, one is forced to wonder to what extent self-education is possible in these areas. Clearly some of the older secondary pupils could be expected to benefit from it, but there are many constraints even here which make it very difficult to justify, especially the schedule of work that must be covered before the exams, and

the teacher's obligation to ensure that his pupils have the best possible chance of passing the exams. In the primary school, true self-instruction is difficult to envisage because of the age and consequent immaturity of the pupils, although on a limited, guided basis, it is of course extensively used in these schools – more so, probably, than in secondary schools.

The difficulty for the primary and secondary school teacher is that self-instruction presupposes certain things: firstly that the learner is strongly motivated in the subject, an assumption that not even the most starry-eyed optimist could make about every member of any French class in any English school. Secondly, it presupposes an arduous period of training of the learner to work on his own. The learner is generally fairly teacher-dependent, and it is necessary to inculcate totally new habits, awareness and responses before he can be let loose on a serious programme of self-instruction.

Thirdly, it presupposes a certain maturity in the learner, such that he will persevere, and will approach his language-learning in a serious way, refraining from showing-off by working through the programme faster than is appropriate for him, etc. Fourthly, it presupposes that the materials for self-instruction exist and are in a form that enables them to be used effectively. These materials must, of course, be bought or created, and certainly improved on the basis of experience. Fifthly, it presupposes a considerable apparatus for guiding students who ask for guidance, for surveillance of their progress, for counselling those who, it is judged, need advice, and so on.

For these, and other reasons, one is led to the conclusion that self-instruction has a rôle to play in tertiary education, where it suits the needs of both the institution and the learners. In this area, the language laboratory, be it fixed or mobile, is the key to the operation, for it enables truly personalised study of an appropriate kind, and one could envisage a student taking a complete course in a language without ever having to ask an instructor a single question.

However, in primary and secondary education, one must doubt whether real self-instruction in languages (or any other subject) is possible. In view of the things that it presupposes alone and of the teacher's responsibility, it does not seem appropriate. Administratively, it would be difficult to envisage. Perhaps the compromise at present found in schools, namely limited guided self-instruction, is the best and most sensible system. Moreover, school education has functions other than training in competence or performance in a group of subjects. It includes such nebulous ideas as the formation of future (good) citizens<sup>1</sup>. Since we live in interdependence with everyone else, real

1 One assumes university students are adults. In Britain, they are legally so, anyway!



self-instruction, which is a lonely occupation, and places the accent on the individual, not the group, does not seem totally appropriate.

Hochschule St. Gallen  
CH-9000 St. Gallen

T. J. A. Bennett