

# Learning Learning

JALT Learner Development N-SIG Forum

Vol.2 No.1

March, 1995

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# Feature article

## Reading courses - a question of self-motivation?

Andrew Barfield

I've been running a reading course this year with an Art and Design major group. The class meets once a week and has about 40 students. In the first term, I set the students the goal of 500 pages minimum for a pass grade, with better grades for the more pages read. We used a class library for this (Oxford *Bookworms*, Yohan 1000-word level readers, Ladybird Children Series, *Teenage Readers* from Malaysia). Some students reached 1000 pages of graded material; most 600 - 700. No explicit teaching of reading skills took place - except to read for enjoyment; to choose books that were interesting stories for the individual reader; and to keep notes.

Each week in class, the students started off with social English where they stood up and had free conversations in English in pairs for about five minutes. (Later in the year, they rotated through two or three partners in this phase of the lesson.) Then they interviewed each other about their reading (how many pages; how much time; key points) before (a) setting their own reading goals for the following week (in terms of time and pages initially) and writing a brief report. The rest of class time was for reading and checking books in and out of the class library. At the mid-term and end-of-term points, the class was asked to graph their reading as well as report on what they had noticed about their reading in English - and again set personal goals. The second term largely followed the same pattern, but with students creating a "manga" (comic strip) as mid-term report for one of the books they had read; with students writing and giving speeches in

small groups; and with the minimum term goal raised to 750 pages. (Everybody reached that except for one in the class.)

In the third term, the focus has switched from graded reading materials to authentic text: *The Japan Times*, *Asahi Evening News*, and so on, and art and design books in English from the university library. With newspaper materials, the students are required to prepare one article a week (they are free to choose whatever they like) by cutting it out and sticking it in their notebooks; writing English paraphrases of six key phrases; writing down five key points; a brief summary (2-3 sentences) and their opinion. In class, they pair up and report on their articles to each other; have a discussion before writing a summary of their partner's oral report and their opinion about the given topic. They are also asked to interview each other - and write a report about - their Art and Design book. Again, very little explicit teaching is given except 10 possible steps to follow with an authentic text (reading the preface in detail; reading the beginning and ends of chapters first; reading through quickly; mind-mapping, and so on).

The switch from the second term to third term took time - but is working. The students are reading more slowly with the authentic texts but *are* reading them, and are really becoming self-organizing and self-motivated readers in English. They also manage their newspaper reports well, and choose a wide range of interesting topics.

I've been collecting many reports from the class, and reading them. So far five things strike me (hypotheses, if you like):

- (1) learners can set their own learning goals in a content-rich course when they have the space to get on with things at their own pace in class and outside class;
- (2) the explicit linkage of grade and number of pages read can act as a useful motivating factor;

(3) developing good group dynamics through treating the class as a social group with its own interests outside reading can help improve individual reading motivation;

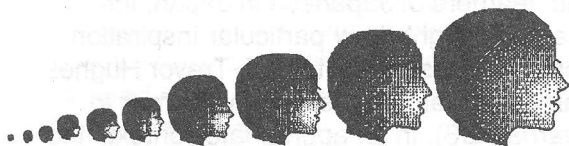
(4) the gap between graded material and authentic material can be bridged once learners have read a broad range of graded materials (1200 - 1300 pages);

(5) the main challenge for a reader in a foreign language may be psychological ('I can' / 'I enjoy' / 'I want to') rather than linguistic ('What does this word mean?' / 'I can't') if the reader has choice / control over what he or she reads. This element of choice is central to self-motivation.

These are tentative points of view. I'm planning to ask the students to write a long end-of-year introspective account of their reading development over the year - in understanding their points of view in depth, I hope to be able to identify key factors that can apply to other skills courses. I'm very interested in hearing from other teachers working with extensive reading and/or learners setting their own goals for reading. I'd also be very happy to share more information with you if you're interested. You can contact me at:

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## Hong Kong Conference Reports : Part III

*This is the final installment of reports on the Conference on 'Autonomy in Language Learning' held in Hong Kong in June last year.*

### **The autonomous learner as researcher, discourse analyst and experimenter**

Ken Willing, Macquarie University,  
Australia

In this plenary, Ken Willing argued that teachers concerned with developing learner autonomy would do well to consider not only self-access and/or classroom settings but also the situation of the learner as user of language "in the real world." He proposed a series of specific procedures whereby learners can become "researchers" of their own language use : recording real life spoken interactions in which they are involved, listening to them repeatedly after the event, then transcribing and analysing segments which appear to be of particular interest. In this report I shall describe Willing's own rationale and add some further clarifications.

Willing suggested that the type of language which learners are normally exposed to via teaching materials is typically "tidied up", being pre-packaged for pedagogical purposes, as compared with the "messy", unpredictable nature of authentic discourse. Materials designed specifically for teaching may tend to present a false picture of how language is actually used, and this is one reason why authentic materials have often been recommended for use in the classroom or self-access centre (cf. Tarone and Yule

(1989). Willing went one stage further and proposed that learners be involved in recording their own samples of authentic discourse - not only baseline samples of "fluent" native speakers, but also samples of the learner's own output, in interaction with people in the "real world". This, Willing claimed, is among the most motivating language there can be for learning, since the learner has a real world investment in it. Also, the "messiness" or unpredictability of authentic discourse becomes less of a barrier to understanding, since the learner already understands the objective context and her own intentions within it.

However, as Willing emphasized, being a collector of samples is not enough : just like researchers, learners should analyse and learn from their data. This is where the metaphor of language learner-user as discourse analyst becomes relevant. In one sense, we are analysts of discourse all the time - not only when we view data objectively, but also "on the fly" as we interact with other people, following the "rules of speaking" : looking out for appropriate moments to take our turn to speak, acknowledging the interlocutor's contribution, and so on. Willing implied, though, that the "distancing effect" involved in listening to recordings of authentic interactions brings home more clearly to learners the importance of discourse features such as those mentioned, and that this understanding can be further enhanced by encouraging them to focus on specific features of their own discourse via repeated listening, identification of problem areas, transcription and further analysis. The role of the teacher or self-access counsellor, Willing suggested, should be to give encouragement by emphasizing ways in which the learner-user is already interacting effectively, as well as to negotiate areas for possible improvement. Problem areas which Willing and his colleagues have identified with their own learners include the following :

- 1) Interactivity (indications which show how interactors are "relating" their contributions - for example, via requests for clarification or "repairs"; proficiency in this area would appear to be particularly important in cross-cultural interactions, where various kinds of misunderstanding are likely to occur).
- 2) Content (both propositional and pragmatic, including - for example - use of modality : many learners seem to come across as over-assertive as a result of weakness in this area).
- 3) Discourse management and structuring (including turn taking, interruptions, overlaps, staging, and negotiating what is to be talked about).
- 4) Politeness (incorporating considerations of social distance, face threat, perceived imposition etc.).

The session concluded with time for questions (a refreshing departure from what appear to be the normal "rules of plenary speaking"), during which the possibility was raised that video might be easier to analyse than audio recordings. Willing conceded this point, remarking that video captures gestures, facial expressions etc. which provide important information regarding the affective aspects of interactions, but he also noted that video cameras are intrusive and have a negative influence on the 'naturalness' of conversations. He recommended pocket-sized, voice-dedicated (but not voice-activated) tape recorders with unobtrusive microphones, but emphasized that the permission of interlocutors should be sought for recording.

Evidently, Willing's suggestions are most appropriate for contexts where learners do use the target language outside the classroom in naturalistic situations : teachers and learners of Japanese in Japan, for example, might draw particular inspiration from the ideas presented (cf. Trevor Hughes Parry's similar suggestions in *Learner to Learner 2/3*). In an appropriate context, the procedures described would appear to be of

considerable interest, not least because they indicate one way in which learners can 'autonomously' reflect on and develop their interactive speaking skills, an area where it might appear difficult otherwise to indicate appropriate resources and activities for independent learning. On the basis of initial recording and self-analysis, it would appear that learners could plan specific improvements, seek out a similar context, again record themselves, and self-evaluate by comparing "pre-" and "post-tapes" (this cycle resembles 'action research' as practised in the field of teacher development, and is perhaps one means by which the learner can become an "experimenter", although this was not spelled out during the presentation itself). One concern, though, may relate to the extent to which learners need to remain dependent on the support of counsellors or teachers who are themselves trained in the field of discourse analysis in order to identify areas for possible improvement such as those suggested by Willing. If learners are to become truly 'autonomous' not only in recording and transcribing but also in analysing and improving their own interactions, do they need to receive explicit instruction in features of discourse, or can they be relied upon to identify problem areas for themselves, without such instruction? Experimenting with Ken Willing's suggestions ourselves might provide us with some of the answers!

Report by Richard Smith

### References

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## An interview with Leni Dam

Leni Dam has become well-known as one of the pioneers in the field of language learner development, having started her attempts to develop learner autonomy in 1979 with a class of 11-year old beginners of English in a Danish comprehensive school. Both Dickinson (1987) and Oxford (1990) report on her classes, while she has offered her own descriptions in Holec (1988), Gathercole (1990) and Dam (forthcoming). However, the focus of her presentation at the Hong Kong Conference - and of the interview extracts transcribed here - was not on her own classes but on how she introduces the concept of learner autonomy to other teachers : Leni combines her role as a practising classroom teacher with work running in-service training workshops in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England and Spain, and she has been instrumental in showing other language teachers how the concept of learner autonomy is not just an abstract ideal, but one which can be actively realized in contexts of classroom instruction.

In her conference presentation, entitled "Developing autonomy in a school context : what about the teacher?", Leni emphasized that many teachers find it difficult to envision the change in their role which is necessary in autonomous language-learning environments. Indeed, she feels that this may be the main reason why development of learner autonomy has still not really taken off on a wide scale in practice, although the concept has been around for some time now. She suggested that many classroom teachers experience a sense of loneliness and lack of confidence in their work, and that concepts such as "learner autonomy" may be perceived as threatening in such circumstances. In her workshops, she therefore focuses initially on building teachers' sense of self-esteem, encouraging them to admit the problems they face in the classroom openly, and attempting to allow the value of developing learner autonomy to

emerge naturally from discussion of classrooms and of teachers' own experiences of learning.

In the extracts from our interview which appear below, Leni elaborates on the philosophy underlying her approach to teacher development, and discusses three particular activities she had earlier described in her presentation : (1) having teachers reflect on their own experiences of (successful and unsuccessful) learning and analyse the factors contributing to their success or failure; (2) showing classroom data (videos, teacher diaries etc.) of other teachers' lessons and inviting participants to raise and discuss questions related to these lessons; and (3) encouraging teachers to make a "contract" indicating what they want to change in their own teaching practice, and how they intend to go about doing so :

*I think my main aim or objective for the workshops is, first of all, for teachers to see themselves as developing all the time; I think that's important - to show teachers that it's always a process - that you can improve, that you can get better - it's a never-ending sort of process - because life changes, surroundings change, students change, family patterns change, and so on. Another main point is to show them that they're not starting from scratch, that they already know things that are useful and that they can make use of. It's the same as showing learners in classes that they know some language and can make use of it. That's why I set up activities such as "think of a learning situation that you were in." Or I might give them a Polish or Russian text - they get half an hour, and they find out that they can guess a lot of it. Then I ask them : "how did you do it?" Talking about this can show teachers that they know a lot about learning already, without reading books about learning strategies and so forth...*

*The other purpose of these activities is to show the teachers that they actually are*

*learners themselves. I think it's important to emphasize this - to get away from seeing oneself as "a teacher". That's the other thing that takes the stress or the threat away from them - if they can forget about "being a teacher" and think more about "what can I do in order to support my learners?"...*

*The next thing that I can see works is to show them some classroom data; I say, "look at this - this is someone else's classroom. What did you notice? Have you got any questions?" And from those questions I can see where their problems are. I show them short extracts of videos, diaries, whatever...*

*From there we can gradually move on to "What would you like to do that is different from what you're doing now?" I ask teachers what \*they\* would like to aim at, what they see as important. And they can base that on their earlier work on "what is good learning - where did I actually learn myself; when didn't I learn?" Their reflection on these things becomes useful at this point : for example, they might have said "I learnt well when the teacher didn't stress me; when I had people to work with; when I had the opportunity to work at my own pace", and so on. Then you can say, "are those the kind of conditions you're creating in your own classroom? If not, how about getting learners working in groups, choosing their own materials, and so on?" When teachers come to write their contracts, lots of them decide to do this kind of thing, though they don't tend to mention the words "learner autonomy". In fact, I avoid using the term "learner autonomy" in my workshops - we talk about "how can the learners be more aware of what they're doing, how they can be more responsible for own learning, and what is it that we would like to change?"*

Report and interview by Richard Smith

