PHILIP RILEY
"WHO'S WHO IN SELF-
ACCESS"

TESOL France
NEWS
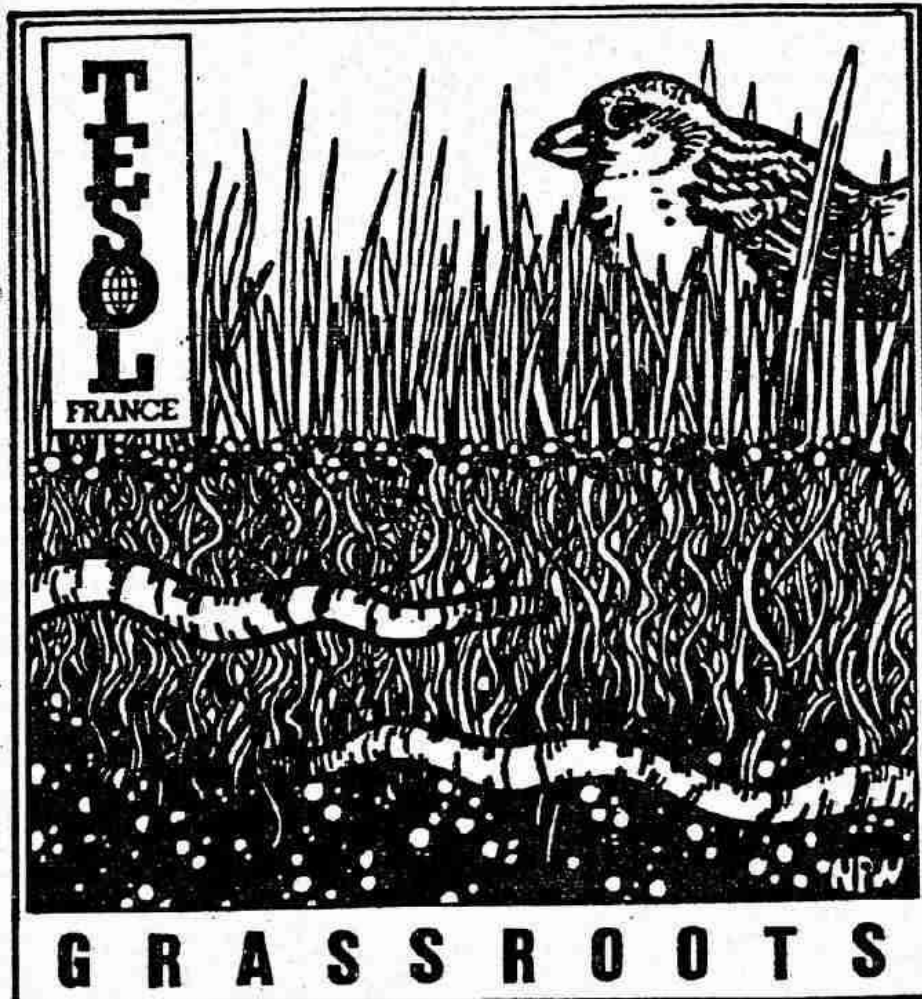
GRASSROOTS

Focus Feature

In the last issue, Pearson Brown expressed an interest in self access --an interest which many of you seemed to share, and which we felt was very much in line with our 'grass roots' theme. C.R.A.P.E.L., an internationally-recognized authority on the subject, provided this month's focus feature.

Running a self-access system in an institutional setting tends to be a complex matter. This is true even when the system itself, in terms of the quantities of materials and equipment or the numbers of learners involved, is a small one, occupying little physical or social space. There are two main reasons for this:

1. Self-access systems usually overlap with other people's territories - other departments and subject areas, other members of staff, other timetables, other academic, financial and administrative priorities.

2. When they are set up, self-access systems bring with them a welter of new ideas and attitudes, materials and requirements which present a challenge to the institutional status quo, since they call into question fundamental issues such as the objectives of the learning programme, the relationship between teaching and learning, methodology or even the very nature of language itself.

Indeed, for some people, the catalytic nature of self-access systems is one of the major justifications for introducing them: by obliging learners and teachers alike to rethink and redistribute their responsibilities, to reconsider just what it is they are trying to do and why and how, the presence of the self-access system has a beneficial, refreshing effect on language learning/teaching within the system as a whole. To take just one example: by making it possible for learners to work on (say) their listening comprehension independently, the self-access system encourages learners and teachers to think about the differences between spoken and written language and between expression and comprehension, about what should best be done in the classroom and outside it, about selection of materials, aims and so on. This leads to a heightened awareness of what is involved in the language-learning process.

True, all this may happen; but, there again, it may not. For every flourishing self-access system-by which I mean, basically, one that is USED - there is almost certainly an empty, neglected one somewhere (and, as likely as not, the door is locked.) After the first fine flush of enthusiasm, there is a slackening of interest all round. The system, be it "médiathèque" or "sound library" or "resource centre" is found to be "irrelevant to the students' real needs", or "it just doesn't work" or "they won't work". It becomes progressively less "open" in every sense and the institution, far from re-examining and revising its practise, settles back with a sigh of relief (and the occasional muttered "I told you so.") into the comfort and security of the old routine.

In this article, I would like - well, I'd like to give definite answers as to why this should be so, as to why some self-access systems are successful and others not. But given the complexity of the problem, I will have to settle for, at best, a clarification of some of the issues involved. A useful way of doing this, it seems to me, is to examine the rôles of the main participants, since this is an approach which has proved to be insightful in examining other forms of social behaviour. To the objection that this is an approach which produces descriptions rather

than solutions I can only reply yes - but any approach which did throw up a single solution to a complex problem is highly suspect. Self-access systems succeed or fail for a variety of reasons, some of which lie well beyond the field of language didactics, however generously defined.

More positively, though, a description based on a grid analysis of roles can help us :

1. To identify aspects of a situation about which we can do something practical. It helps us identify the weak spots, if you like.

2. To clarify and organise our own thoughts about self-access and related concepts such as self-direction. This can be personally satisfying, of course, but it can also be crucial to the successful functioning of the system: as things stand, people involved with self-access spend much of their time justifying and explaining the system to colleagues and learners. Anything which helps us do this in a consistent and co-herent way is more than a rhetorical or theoretical exercise, since it has direct repercussions on the way the system is perceived and used. This is why, in the last section (p.) I have drawn up a brief glossary of "language learning schemes".

Before proceeding to an analysis and discussion of the various rôle involved in self-access schemes, I would like to make three general points:

1. Roles are not physical people, individuals. They are bundles of rights, duties and competencies which confer the capacity to/form sets of social-per-ly related acts. This is not sociological hair-splitting, but an attempt to help us concentrate on learners as learners, teachers as teachers, and so on. In real life, people play a multiplicity of roles: for example, the distinction I have made between Helper and Librarian/Secretary is at the level of role: in human terms these two roles are usually embodied in one and the same enthusiastic but over-worked language teacher. Similarly, a teacher who installs a piece of equipment "becomes" a technician and a technician who helps a learner find an elusive document in the catalogue "becomes" a Helper. The roles examined in this article have been limited to four: Technician, Helper, Secretary-Librarian ("Documentalist") and Learner. Clearly this list could be considerably extended to include heads of depart-ment, other learners and so on, but there has to be a cut-off point somewhere.

2. There is no "best" self-access scheme.[1] By this I mean that there is no one, ideal self-access system suitable for each and every situa-tion. Learners vary, both as individuals and in groups, in their objec-tives, needs, motivations and learning styles. Institutions vary in their requirements and resources. Practical and pedagogical constraints vary (the voltage, the examination syllabus). Every educational situa-tion is a unique combination of these factors and therefore every self-access system should be "one-off".[2] This does not mean that teachers involved in self-access cannot learn from one another, nor that all equipment is equally good; but it does mean that the "pre-packaged" general-purpose self-access system is a contradiction in terms.

3. "Self-access" is not the same as "self-direction"[3]
Calling a system "self-access" no more guarantees the freedom of the individual than does calling a Republic "democratic". It is the po-litical reality which counts - who does what to whom and who takes the decisions. In a learning programme, the decisions concern

                    objectives and needs
                    materials
                    study techniques
                    organisation (rhythm and duration; times and places)
                    monitoring and evaluation

Depending on the situation (in particular, on practical and institutional constraints and on the distribution of roles) each of these decisions may be taken either by the teacher, or by the learner or by learner and teacher in collaboration. In other words, self-direction and learner centeredness are matters of degree which are directly related to who takes which decisions.

Personally, I agree with those who say that a self-access system where none of these decisions are taken by the learner is "self-access" in name only - but it is a name we are stuck with and the only realistic attitude is to take that situation as a baseline, a "degree-zero", even if the meaning of self-access is pedagogically trivial in such cases ("physical contact between learner and materials").

I - THE ROLES OF TECHNICIAN, HELPER, LIBRARIAN-SECRETARY AND LEARNER IN A SELF-ACCESS SYSTEM.

1. THE ROLE OF TECHNICIAN

The main tasks of a technician responsible for a self-access system are usually: the installation, development and maintenance of equipment; the ordering and stocking of spare parts; stocking of materials and portable equipment; copying and reproduction.

(i) Installation

The technician's role in the installation of new equipment goes well beyond screwing things to walls and plugging them in. He/she is also actively involved in the selection and purchase of equipment. This process involves a dialectical discussion between technical and pedagogical criteria in which it is the technician's task to advise on the suitability of new equipment from the point of view of price, robustness, compatibility and proposed use. In installing a new item of equipment, the technician will always aim at the freest degree of learner access that is compatible with security.

(ii) Development

A technician in an open-access system is continuously involved in action-research in educational technology i.e. in using her expertise to devise appropriate solutions to the problems experienced by learners and by other members of staff. For example, in a sound library where the Helper needed statistics about learner's use of the system, the technicians developed a computer programme for handling the information on request-slips which saved the Helper two full days' work per month.

(iii) Maintenance

Self-access systems tend to be the victims of their own success: the more they are used, the more the pieces of equipment are likely to break down or wear out. The technician's traditional solution to the problem of wear-and-tear is to see that equipment is used as little as possible and then only by qualified personnel (i.e. herself). In an open-access system, this is, by definition, impossible; the technician therefore accepts wear-and-tear as a necessary evil which does not reflect on her expertise. At the same time, she will do everything possible to minimise these problems by providing training, help and advice in the proper use and manipulation of equipment. This may well include equipment which has never been regularly entrusted to learners before, such as video cameras, micro-computers, or fast copiers, though it is worth noting that these are becoming cheaper, easier to use and are often the subjects

of service contracts with the manufacturers, all of which lightens
the technician's load. To a large extent, the technician's role
changes from that of guardian of the crown jewels to that of inst-
ructor in the use of audio-visual equipment.
(iv) Copying

The copying and reproduction of materials is a vexed question.
In some institutions, this is regarded as the technician's preroga-
tive, whilst in others it is regarded as below his dignity: which
of these attitudes reigns seems to depend on tradition and persona-
lities rather than on any logical prinicples. Whilst both attitudes
lead to bottlenecks in the supply of copies, the latter does at
least leave open the possibility of providing teachers and learners
with some sort of do-it-yourself copying facilities. This is espe-
cially true now that the new generation of fast copiers for cas-
settes is available, as well as radio-cassette-cassette recorders
which can be used on a smaller scale for the same purpose. The best
arrangement I have come across personally is one where the techni-
cian installs and maintains copying facilities which are placed
at the disposal of adequately prepared teachers and learners. This
set-up is faster and more convenient for all concerned.

An open-access technician is well-versed in the copyright laws
and his position of responsibility as a professional is respected
by his colleagues and by the learners using the system. However,
it is not his job to snoop on individuals; apart from anything else
the law covering copying by individuals for personal use is diffe-
rent.

Finally, and to get things into perspective, it is worth remem-
bering that certain items of equipment which some technicians insist
can only be used by technicians or with a technician present because
they are complicated and expensive

a) have been greatly simplified over recent years (photocopiers,
   video recorders, fast copiers, cameras,etc.)and

b) are only relatively expensive. For example, the secretary
   who is kindly typing this for me is using a machine which
   costs twice as much as a standard fast copier - yet I can't
   imagine what her reaction would be if a technician insisted
   on being present every time she had a letter to type!

2. THE ROLE OF HELPER

Some people object to the use of the term "Helper" and it has
to be admitted that it is not a particularly pretty one. But it is useful,
since it underlines the nature of a pedagogic role which does not involve
teaching. The essence of the Helper's role is that it consists of per-
forming acts which facilitate learning. Other terms which have been sug-
gested in the last two decades or so include "Knower", "Facilitator"
and "Counsellor": common to them is an attempt to distinguish teaching
from learning. If you accept that teaching does not automatically make
learning happen,that the two activities are not in a causal relation-
ship, that learning is something done BY learners, not TO or FOR them
- then you need a new label for someone whose role is helping-to-learn
rather than teaching. Such a person will be willing - indeed, it will
be their main aim - to hand over to the learner the responsibility for
his/her learning; where the learner is not yet competetnt to exercise
that responsibility, the role of this person will be to help him acquire
the necessary skills and knowledge so that he can take the constitutive
decisions of his learning programme and participate efficiently in the
learning activities.

The tasks of a Helper in a self-access system are, therefore, didac-
tic in nature. They will include learner-training; the selection, proces-
sing and production of materials; research and development and (probably)
liaising with the learners' main subject departments or employer.

26

(i) learner-training [(4)]

Learner-training means helping learners to learn how to learn: more specifically this means:

helping learners to identify their needs
    "   "   to define their objectives
    "   "   to select appropriate materials
    "   "   to choose appropriate study techniques
    "   "   to organise themselves (when, where, how
                            often, how long?)
    "   "   to evaluate and monitor progress

This work may be carried out through face-to-face counselling, but it may also be done through demonstrations, questionnaires and information handouts, peer-group exchanges. The role of Helper demands the linguistic and pedagogic skills necessary to carry out these tasks efficiently, but it also requires patience, tolerance and empathy. The Helper is above all able to distinguish between helping and interfering. If the rôle is maieutic, Socratic, it is so in the sense that the Helper helps the learner find his own answers, not in the sense that he helps the learner "to see the light".

(ii) Selection, processing and production of materials.

The Helper will select materials of use and interest to the learners who use the self-access system in question: the criteria for selection, therefore, will be directly related to the learners' needs and objectives as well as to their learning techniques and styles (ideally — this is a major area for research). Processing and production of materials will be necessary when completely suitable materials are not otherwise available; however, as this work (transcription, questions, keys, suggested exercises, etc.) is very time-consuming, the Helper will also try to provide such things as lists of suggested activities which can be applied to almost any authentic document: Learners will be helped to select, process and produce documents themselves.

Materials may consist of sound and video recordings, written documents, slides, games, posters, realia. Whatever the physical system employed for stocking these materials, the Helper tries to ensure that in terms of accessibility, presentation and classification, it is as "learner friendly" as possible. This means that the material should be as openly and easily available as is practical; it also means that a professional librarian's method of classifying material will probably not be at all suitable, since such systems rank precision and rapidity for the specialist above clarity and simplicity for the user. If learners cannot find what they want in the system without appealing to a specialist for help, we can hardly talk about self-access.

One possible system of classification where the Helper takes the "pedagogic role" of materials as a starting point, is the following: materials are first classified into back-up documents, pedagogical documents and authentic documents.

(a) Back up documents are an essential part of learner-training.

They provide information on how to use the open-access system in question; questionnaires for helping learners analyse their needs and objectives, suggestions and advice on study-techniques, self-assessment sheets and works of reference such as dictionaries and grammars. The provision of these documents will be given priority by the Helper, not least because they take the heat off her to some extent, allowing her to get on with other aspects of her work.

(b) <u>Pedagogical documents</u> consist of commercially-published courses, materials produced on the spot, exercises and texts set by teachers, etc. The Helper will make sure that she is on publishers' mailing-lists. She will also make a point of regularly encouraging individual teachers to contribute their own productions, no matter how modest, to the collection.

(c) <u>Authentic documents</u> are documents of any kind which were not originally produced for the purpose of teaching a language.

The Helper's next task will be to see that the existence and contents of these three major categories will be "expressed" in the catalogue in such a way as to be conceptually accessible to the learner. This is a major point and one that can only be dealt with very briefly here. It comes down to saying that the categories and sub-categories of the cataloguing system, the descriptions it contains, should correspond to the learners' metalinguistic categories, and to their representations of the language-learning process. This is not quite such a tall order as it may seem to be at first glance, since many of these categories are quite wide-spread; nonetheless, it is at this point that the Helper will have to focus all her efforts at learner-training.

The catalogue then will help the learner choose and retrieve the right document. The Helper will try to provide the necessary information, which can be dealt with under three broad headings: "contents", "linguistic features" and "technical".

Contents

- for pedagogical documents: the aims of the producers of the materials; level of difficulty; skills dealt with; models; areas of language concentrated on, such as grammar, vocabulary, functions, intonation, style, etc.,
- for authentic documents: a description of the communicative event ("conversation" "lecture", "radio drama") together with a summary of the plot, the themes, etc.

Linguistic features

- the Helper will indicate what these are for all materials, but they are usually more relevant to authentic materials: for recorded sound or video materials, they will include indications as to whether the discourse is spontaneous or not; accents and speeds of delivery; the number of participants and type of interaction; any relevant background information; the length and date of the recording; quality of recording.

Technical information means the information necessary for retrieving that document, which is internal to the system. The most important technical information is the code number of the document sought and details of any accompanying material, such as transcriptions, textbooks, newspaper articles, etc.

(iii) Research and development

It would not be possible to list all the topics for research within the general fields of self-access and self-direction. Indeed, almost everything the Helper does is research in a real and immediate sense: even the most "practical" of activities, such as producing a back-up document to help learners who want to ask questions at the end of a lecture, will go shooting off into motivation, discourse analysis, learning style and so on. Some of the topics we

in the C.R.A.P.E.L. are looking at are: learner-helper discourse; self-direction in institutional settings and for large numbers of learners; cross-cultural variation in learning style and attitudes; learner-training; materials development, including CAL, needs analysis, helper-training, as well as projects on the acquisition of specific areas of communicative competence such as written expression or listening comprehension. Even so, we are aware that there are whole areas that we are still neglecting.

3. THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN-SECRETARY

(What a pity the word "documentalist" does not exist in English.)

The tasks of the librarian include: the acquisition, exchange and accession of materials; cataloguing; transcribing; administration and finance.

(i) Acquisition, exchange and accession.

Materials can be bought, begged or borrowed. Where money is short, the librarian is obviously obliged to concentrate on the two latter methods, which can be surprisingly fruitful: apart from other educational institutions, it is worth contacting multi-national corporations, international organisations, embassies and cultural organisations (British Council, Goethe Institut, Alliance Françaises, etc.) advertising agencies, tourist boards, etc. This can involve a considerable amount of work for the Librarian, since such requests need to be constantly renewed and new contacts found. The librarian will try, therefore, to set up exchanges where possible: this has the added advantage of making it possible to request particular kinds of materials. The coming of the satellite era promises profound changes: I know of one self-access system which already has Russian, Italian and English "on tap" and the equipment will probably become relatively cheap in the next 3 - 5 years.

(ii) Cataloguing

There are any number of cataloguing systems available. In choosing and implementing a system the Librarian will work in close collaboration with the Helper (for the reasons indicated in 2 (ii), above).

The nitty-gritty of cataloguing-typing the cards, sticking on labels, etc, is not wildly exciting - but if the system is to function it must be done regularly and meticulously. Since no-one wants to do the same work twice, it really is worth getting things right the first time and the Librarian will not try to economise unnecessarily on such things as the quality of filing cards, plastic covers, lettering, etc. His golden rule, though, will always be to keep a duplicate copy of every-thing - cards and transcriptions above all - and he will cheerfully and without the slightest twinge of bad conscience keep these copies under lock and key to replace losses which may occur.

The Librarian will make sure that the clearest possible indications are available to the learners as to how the cataloguing system works (diagrams on the wall, magnified versions of filing cards, lists of categories, etc). It is also essential to ensure that it is easy for learners to replace materials exactly where they came from.

(iii) Transcriptions

A coefficient of 8 x 1 is quite common for transcription work; that is, one hour's recording takes 8 hours to transcribe. This means that transcriptions represent a major investment in terms of the Librarian's time. Whenever possible, the Librarian will, therefore, find materials which already have transcriptions - or get someone else to do them, such as the learners themselves or a friendly lecteur. Copies should be kept of all transcriptions and the Librarian will regularly check the stock for gaps and to see that materials have been correctly replaced.

Finally, it is important for the Librarian's colleagues to understand that accessioning takes time: it is simply not realistic to give the Librarian a document today and expect everything to be available to the learners tomorrow. On his side, the Librarian will regularly contact colleagues in the various language departments to see if they have any orders or suggestions: he will also carefully follow any changes in the syllabus likely to have repercussions on the learners' requests.

4. THE ROLE OF THE LEARNER

The role of the learner in a self-access system is to learn to learn and to apply that skill to the learning of a language. Since it is unrealistic to imagine a situation where learners would spend, say, three months "learning to learn" before they got down to studying the language, these two learning activities will be carried out simultaneously.

The self-access system is only one of the resources potentially available to the self-directed learner: others include meetings with native speakers, radio and TV programmes, courses of various kinds, the learner's own materials, etc. Nonetheless, for most learners in an institutional setting, the self-access system will be a major resource. The learner will look on it as his or her laboratory, where learning experiments are carried out and the results applied.

This approach will involve a certain amount of trial-and-error. Far from regarding this as a waste of time, the learner sees it as an investment for the future, a way of discovering his or her own learning style. (Classrooms also involve trial-and-error as far as the individual learner is concerned, but since he or she has no say in planning future work, no advantage is drawn from this).

The tasks of the learner include: defining needs and objectives, selecting materials and work techniques, organising and implementing the programme and evaluating and monitoring progress. Ideally, help will be available in all these areas, either through direct contact with the Helper, through back-up documents and materials or through discussion and collaboration with other learners. Progressively, the learner will take over responsibility for all the choices and decisions which make up the learning programme.

(i) Defining needs and objectives

The learner will think about the situation in which he or she will use the foreign language and the uses to which it will be put. With the help of the Helper, simulations, authentic documents etc, it is possible to draw up a list of linguistic objectives and to decide on priorities.

30

(ii) Selecting materials and work techniques

Once a (set of) linguistic objective(s) has been defined, the learner will go about selecting appropriate materials. Ideally, the self-access system will catalogue materials under headings which correspond to the learner's criteria for the description of his/her objectives. For example "Listening comprehension", "Medical English" "With an American accent". Very often, though, these categories and criteria will have to be teased out in conversation with the Helper, through the use of back-up documents or through "trial-and-error".

The learner will call on imagination or previous experience when it comes to selecting appropriate work techniques. He or she will also try out techniques suggested by the Helper or other learners. The learner's approach to the selection of both materials and techniques will be eclectic, so that personal repertoires can be compiled and enriched.

(iii) Organising and implementing the programme

The learner will take upon himself the responsibility for deciding when, where, how often and how long he will work; obvously, though, he will have to take into account practical constraints — such as the opening hours of the sound library or his own time-table — when taking these decisions. In particular, he will take the fullest possible advantage of the fact that he is able to learn outside the classroom and without the presence of a teacher. Any decision taken can be reviewed or changed as and when the learner thinks it necessary to do so.

(iv) Evaluating and monitoring progress

The learner will establish criteria and techniques for evaluating his progress. These will vary according to his personal needs, objectives, motivation, etc; they will not be based on criteria external to his learning programme and aims.

The learner will respect the self-access facilities and will help other learners. When possible, he will also contribute ideas and materials to the collection.

II   ..... AND WHAT's WHAT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING SCHEMES [5]

Here is a glossary of terms which crop up frequently in discussion on language-learning schemes where some kind of effort is made to "focus on the learner". Each term has been given a brief explanation, but these are not meant to be hard-and-fast definitions, since they often overlap or are used with a number of different meanings.

1. Teacher-centered/learner-centered

The establishment and running of any programme of learning involves a considerable number of decisions — what, when, where and how to study, selection of materials and work techniques, evaluation, etc. When the majority of these decisions are taken by the teacher (or institution)

we talk about a "teacher-centered" approach. When learners are free to take most decisions themselves, the approach is "learner-centered". An approach is not necessarily 100% teacher or learner centered: here is a simple grid for assessing the degree of learner-centeredness:

Nature of decision / Taker of decision	To learn English (not French)	Where	When	Rhythm (how often)	Scheme	Material	Study techniques	Needs	Objectives	Monitoring & evaluation	Duration (how long?)
Teacher (or institution											
Learner											
Teacher and Learner											

In cases where teachers and learners take a decision together, we talk about NEGOTIATION (which may involve compromises). When a teacher tries to identify and take into account the learner's opinions (needs, motivations, etc.) but nonetheless conserves the right to take decisions, we may use the term CONSULTATION (or "learner-centered teaching").

2. Individualisation ("individualised learning", "individualised instruction") is, historically at least, linked with programmed learning and based on a thoroughly behaviouristic psychology. As it is generally practised, it leaves very little freedom of choice to the individual learner. Rather, it is the teacher who tries to adapt his methodology and materials to the learner, like a doctor writing out a prescription. That is, the majority of the relevant decisions are made for the learner, not by him. It is in fact individualised TEACHING: it aims at the most efficient use of the teacher and at the most effective results, but in terms of what the teacher wants the learner to achieve.

> "Individualisation can be pursued within a thoroughly totalitarian framework".
>
> (John TRIM, 1976)

Many observers now prefer to avoid this term altogether because of its increasing vagueness. In their UNESCO report "Etude critique des modalités d'apprentissage autonome (autodidaxie et semi-autonomie") (1978), Chaix and O'Neill found it to be used so variously as to be almost meaningless, an opinion shared by Dickinson (1982), Holec (1980) and many others. On the other hand, some writers such as Geddes and Sturtridge (1982) prefer to continue to use "individualisation" as an umbrella term for all those approaches which aim to take into account the specific nature of each learner, whether teacher-centered or learner-centered.

3. Autonomy is the capacity to intitiate and successfully manage one's own learning programme. To do this, one needs to be both competent to take and fully responsible for all the deicisons involved in the planning and implementation of that programme. This means that recourse to external or institutional aid must be the result of a deliberate and informed choice. An autonomous learner is someone who has learnt how to learn. He is capable of identifying his needs, defining his own aims and objectives, obtaining his own materials and selecting his own work-techniques.

Since relatively few language learners are autonomous, they usually have to go through a period of SEMI-AUTONOMY during which they receive a certain amount of institutional or external help. But, by definition, this help must take the form of helping the learner to learn how to learn. While learning the language, he is also learning how to identify his needs and so on. That is, he will be learning to direct his own learning programme. This process may take many different forms, just as physical fitness may be acquired by playing one of a large number of different sports.

One of the most common forms of acquiring autonomy is through a process of self-directed learning.

4. Self-directed learning is the process by which learners construct and implement their own learning programme in cases where they reject prefabricated and institutional materials and courses.

Self-direction is only one of the options available to the autonomous learner. All fully self-directed learners are autonomous, but not all autonomous learners are self-directed: if, after consideration, an autonomous learner decides that a particular course or text-book does correspond to her needs, aims, etc. then her decision to follow that course or work through that book is a real choice and she is exercising her autonomy. Autonomy is a CAPACITY, being able to do things such as to evaluate a course offered by an institution and to decide whether or not it is what you are looking for. Self-directed learning is a PROCESS, one of the ways in which an autonomous learner might go about meeting her objectives.

Self-directed learning may take place within an institutional framework. Such "self-directed learning schemes" vary greatly as regards material organisation and degree of learner freedom, but they all involve learner access to the institution's materials and equipment and some kind of counselling service.

The decision to undertake a programme of self-directed learning can only be made and successfully implemented by a learner who possesses the necessary knowledge and skills, or at least knows where and how to acquire them. This means that there will be periods of LEARNER TRAINING or preparation during which a learner may willingly suspend control over a decision in order to increase her range of learning choices, skills, etc. For example, she may try out at new study techniques which have been suggested by a friend or teacher. Even when we are concentrating on LEARNING TO LEARN, we have to learn to learn SOMETHING, we cannot do it in the abstract.

There may well be institutional limits on the degree of self-direction which may be practised in a given situation (see p.10). Again, it is quite possible that an autonomous learner might choose to follow an objectively unsuitable study programme such as an institutionally-defined syllabus, in order to attain some "higher good" such as an academic or professional qualification.
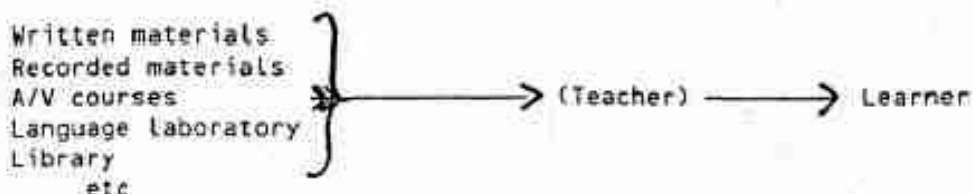
5. Independent study and distance-teaching

Basically, these expressions provide geographical rather than pedagogical information. They tell us simply that the learner and the teacher are not physically in the same place when the work is being done. But they tell us nothing further about the relationships between them, nor about the nature of the work. In practice, such learning programmes tend to be very rigidly controlled by the teaching institution. Whether we are talking about traditional school homework, or correspondence courses or TV and radio educational broadcasts, the learner tends to have little say in the planning of the programme; he is one of a large number of people who are set identical tasks. The physical absence of the teacher is usually compensated for by detailed written or recorded instructions.

Confusingly, such schemes are often described as "highly individualised", and in the sense that each learner may be attended to indvidually and may receive individual instructions and evaluation, this claim is true. Nonetheless, they still remain completely teacher-centered, since it is the teacher who takes all the relevant decisions.

6. Autodidaxy.

The emphasis here is on the fact that the learner is self-taught, that no teacher or institution intervenes. He becomes his own teacher, but this may mean that he simply forces himself to work as a teacher would have done, without adapting his programme in any way to meet his personal objectives etc. i.e. without learning to learn. Autodidacts are not necessarily autonomous or self-directed.

7. Self-access schemes are characterised by the fact that study-materials are made directly available to learners, the teacher no longer acting as an intermediary or filter:

Written materials
Recorded materials
A/V courses   ⟩   →   (Teacher)   →   Learner
Language laboratory
Library
    etc

Although self-access is probably a necessary condition for most forms of self-directed and learner-centered work, it is by no means a sufficient one. Self-access schemes can be highly directive as a result of the selection and nature of the materials in questions. Moreover, all the other decisions involved in the learning programme (see 1 above) may still be taken by the teacher or institution. Some form of learner-training has to be built into any self-access system which aims at increasing the degree of self-direction or autonomy of its users.

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1. See the Introduction and Section II of RILEY, P. (ed) 1985, Discourse and Learning. London, Longman

2. Descriptions of particular self-access systems will be found in ZOPPIS, C. and RILEY, P. "The sound and video-library" (RILEY, ibid) and in SUTER, B. (1985) "Le centre de ressources multi-média et le développement de l'autonomie chez l'apprenant". Strasbourg, C.D.C.C. Council of Europe.

3. For a more detailed discussion of this point see RILEY, P. (forthcoming) "From self-access to self-direction". In TOWELL, R. (ed) The Advanced Language Learner, Acts of the 1986 Conference of the Association for French Language Studies and the Edelhoff-Riley-Widdowson discussion on "negotiation" in SIXT, D. (ed) Communication across cultures: comprehension as negotiation of meaning. Amsterdam, Goethe Institut.

4,5. This section is a modified version of a passage in MOULDEN, H. and RILEY, P. (forthcoming) Learner Training, C.U.P. This book also includes detailed exemplification as to how Helpers and Learners will actually go about the various tasks such as "defining needs" or "monitoring" which are mentioned here.