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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND AUTONOMY

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PREFACE

This collection of papers represents a wide variety of continuing experimental work on autonomy and self-direction in second language learning.

As the reader will see, the differences between these experiments are mainly due to characteristics of the target audience such as age-range (M. Phillips) or the variety of the users' learning objectives (C. Stanchina). In other cases, the differences can be explained in terms of the structural characteristics of the institutions concerned or in terms of the characteristics of the learning situation (BBC).

These differences account for the various ways of implementing and managing autonomy which are described here but - allowing for the specific constraints under which we all work - it is clear that the contributors belong to the "learner-centred approach" club. However, taking J. Trim's paper as a framework of analysis it is clear that our club was divided as to the relative weight of the advantages and limitations of autonomy. Everybody was agreed that the equation between individualisation and autonomy is empty - (L. Dickinson and Trim) - but there were heated arguments about the definition of autonomy on the one hand and its intrinsic value on the other. (See L. Dickinson's definition of autonomy as 'the upper limit of self-directed learning' as opposed to P. Kiley's more global approach and Aston v. CRAPEL).

To explain these divergences, it would perhaps be useful to bring in the concepts of linguistic autonomy and of pedagogical autonomy as defined by Cembalo and Holec (1973). It is possible to look at autonomous systems as a useful means of teaching languages, in order to take account of the creativity of linguistic systems and to meet the specific language needs expressed by the individual learners. But some of us felt that autonomy should be more pervasive, indeed, that pedagogical autonomy was a necessary

condition for success in language learning because of the ever increasing demands made on individuals' abilities to generate their own learning devices and be self-reliant.

This is what J. Trim referred to when he said; 'there appears to be a general feeling [..] that supportive structures should be developed within the individual rather than erected around him; He should be a vertebrate rather than a crustacean'.

Although these are two fundamentally different views, the reader will find out that there are also striking similarities in what the various institutions represented here actually do. It seems to me that the most characteristic common features are the following:

The reduction of the number of traditionally accepted intermediaries between those who plan the courses and the learners (i.e., the planning, designing, course writing, teaching, learning string and, complementarily, the increased circulation of information between the learner and the institution.

Both point at systems marked by their mobility and allowing for the easy and constant feed-back so essential for evaluation (J. Galleymore).

Another interesting innovation consists in various attempts to get learners to design their own material (M. Phillips, P. Riley, C. Stanchina). After Prof. Ted Rodgers' experiments in Hawaii and Malaysia, we knew it was feasible - and successful - to turn children into material-designers but attempting it with adults who already have strongly grounded learning habits leads to special problems and necessitates psychological preparation (P. Riley). I have tried to show some of the psycholinguistic problems involved in my paper.

Particular mention should be made of L. Dickinson's paper, which helped

us clarify a number of underlying questions - and conflicts - concerning the current terminology. In fact, the number of labels used - to which W. Chaix from U.N.E.S.C.O. added autodidaxy - is a very serious problem. We thought that an agreement on terminology would be a necessary step forward, but was outside the scope of our meeting.

As usual, this seminar opened more questions than it solved, but we felt that it helped us - and hopefully our readers - to clarify a number of issues and direct further research and experimentation.

I would like to finish this brief introduction by mentioning the fact that the delay in publication has made it possible to insert a number of recent items into the bibliography, which, we hope, will be of major interest to the reader.

We would like to express our thanks to S. Innes, Head of the BBC Further Education Division, for allowing us to reprint the paper she had prepared for the seminar but could not be present to deliver.

We would also like to thank the GRAPEL for their financial help in the publication of this seminar and Mrs. A. Waites and Mrs. E. Cole, whose patience and autonomy in typing these papers justified our endeavour.

E. HARDING-ESSCH