

Successful Self-access through Learner Development

The following is based on a talk I presented to the Learner Independence SIG at Eurocentre Cambridge on November 1991. The talk was originally intended to describe a specialized self-access course currently being run at International House, London, but some of the questions I was asked at the conference and subsequent experience have led to certain changes in emphasis.

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Introduction

It has been said that self-access centres are currently in the doldrums: the initial rush of enthusiasm has been replaced by a degree of skepticism. Yet there remains tremendous interest in the concept and, without wishing to sound chauvinistic, the SAC that I work in remains lively and popular.

To generate or maintain enthusiasm for self-access, I believe several ingredients are essential. These include the centre being designed in accordance with the needs of the target users. It must also be comfortable and convenient so that students do not have to make a great effort to attend. Equally important, teachers must be involved as thoroughly as possible. They need to be given real responsibility in terms of the actual running and supervision of the centre and in terms of creating and cataloguing materials. There must also be some kind of programme of learner development to support students working in a SAC. It is upon this last aspect that I wish to focus here.

The spearhead of IH London's learner development programme lies in a specialized hour-a-day one-month supplementary class called Freestyle. This is open to all levels and takes place

in the SAC. The way this class is realised in practice is strongly influenced by our local circumstances, things like the kind of materials we have, the geography of the SAC, the nature of the other classes students attend, timetabling patterns and so on. On one level, the class works in a kind of remedial capacity with the flexibility to address the problem areas that cannot conveniently be dealt with in the general English class or in other optional classes. If learners are to benefit from self-access learning they may need training and/or support in the six areas which follow. Our Freestyle course includes a student manual designed to complement the support provided by the teacher.

1. Identification of needs.
2. Specification of objectives.
3. Selection of appropriate materials.
4. Use of appropriate strategies/techniques.
5. Self-assessment.
6. Materials / system evaluation.

The following box is an illustration of the content of a page from the Freestyle manual. It sets out some ideas to help students make the most of the tutorials which they will later have with the teacher of their group.

SEVEN IDEAS FOR TUTORIALS

Here are some ways in which you can use your tutorial. It is a good idea to tell your teacher a day or two **before** the tutorial what you want to do with the time.

1. Bring an exercise (or exercises) or any kind of writing you have done. The teacher can go over this work with you and help with any difficulties.
2. Bring a list of questions you have about anything in English that you do not understand - vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, meaning etc. You should make a note of these on the Problem Page of this manual.
3. Ask your teacher to test you on something you have been studying. It might be vocabulary or grammar.
4. Do some speaking practice. This could be prepared or unprepared. Later your teacher will be able to help you with any difficulties you may be having. Possible topics for this speaking practice could be:
 - the teacher interviewing you
 - you interviewing the teacher
 - you describing a picture
 - you giving a talk about your job or one of your hobbies or interests
 - a role-play of some situation. You can play yourself; the teacher can play the part of another person. For example, you might like to practice a situation in which you have to use English in England – shopping, dinner with your host family, using the telephone, renting a car, a job interview etc.
 - a friendly chat about anything you like
5. Do some reading aloud – prepared or unprepared. The teacher will be able to help you with any of your pronunciation problems.
6. Make a tape. Arrange with the teacher to make a tape of you speaking. You could use any of the ideas in 4 and 5 above. Later, the teacher will be able to analyse your language and help you with any problems.
7. Ask your teacher for advice about materials for home study.

ENJOY YOUR STUDIES!

The role of the teacher

Freestyle teachers have a dual role – part catalyst, part resource. As a catalyst, the teacher strives to assist students in some or all of the above six areas. As a resource, the teacher is available to provide information, linguistic or otherwise. The main way these roles are fulfilled is through one-to-one tutorials. Most of the rest of the teacher's time is spent in general trouble-shooting for whomsoever needs help. Normal class size means that it is only possible to provide, at the most, about three fifteen-

minute tutorials over the entire nineteen hours of the course. For many students and teachers the tutorials have proved very interesting and rewarding.

What the class is like

On the first day the teacher generally organizes group formation activities with the following aims:

- Students and teachers all get to know each other as people and as learners.
- Students begin to identify their own needs in a very general way.

- Students are introduced to the available resources.
- Students group themselves according to their main focus of interest which may be one of four: grammar, vocabulary, listening or pronunciation. These are the areas that our SAC is geared to helping with. Later in the course it is hoped that the groups will get together to exchange information about their learning experience.

The students are then given their manuals and the importance of note-taking and record-keeping is stressed.

In subsequent lessons, students begin to work relatively independently. Some tutors have set aside whole lessons for the class to engage in group activities or review sessions. Others have concentrated more on one-to-one work.

Observations and reflections

When observing students who attend Freestyle classes, I am reminded of Maslow's concepts of 'inner-direction', 'other-direction' and 'autonomy'. Other-directed people are supposedly very dependent on input from outside themselves; they have little sense of inner goals; they are generally sociable types. In an EFL context, they would seem to need quite a lot of support from the teacher and so I would dub these people LEANERS.

Inner-directed people are very independent and self-reliant but they too lack longer term goals. They are nature's computer buffs. They are very happy to work on computers and they look as if they are happy and are getting on and may seem to resent teacher intervention which they may see as interference.

These people are very attracted to Freestyle classes and I would call them LONERS.

Autonomous people were, for Maslow, operating on a higher plane. They represented a balance between inner and outer worlds; these people were self-directed but not aloof, sociable but not dependent on social approval; they were goal-orientated and mature. I suppose they would, also, have to be seen as the ideal student, and so what can we call them but LEARNERS?

Our problem could be seen as how to convert a number of Loners and a few Leaners into Learners! Or, to put it another way, how to get a collection of people who will be together for an hour a day for a month to see themselves as members of a group that can learn from each other. Up to now we have attempted to effect this by the following means:

- i) initially keeping the students away from the computers and lab booths so that they may come to see technology as one means to achieve certain ends, but not as an end in itself
- ii) encouraging group identification and mutual help (vocabulary people, grammar people, listening people and pronunciation people)
- iii) bringing the whole group together for learner development activities such as those described in 'Learning to Learn English' (Ellis and Sinclair, CUP) and also halfway through the

course for an evaluation session.

We have found, however, that attempts to instill group consciousness in Freestyle lessons have rarely borne fruit. Perhaps students get enough of that in their ordinary classes and appreciate the relative privacy that is an option here. Perhaps the class simply attracts Loners rather than Leaners. Other factors might be the range of levels and the diversity of needs within the class.

The future

1. Ideally we would like a narrower range of levels within one class; this would facilitate group formation but would depend on there being enough demand for Freestyle for us to be able to divide students into separate classes according to level.
2. A re-written manual, classified more in tune with the six 'areas of support' listed earlier. In particular, we need to find ways to help learners more effectively towards formulating objectives and assessing their own progress. (The manual in its current form leans towards helping students locate materials - Area 4 above.) A format for 'learner contracts' would be something I would particularly like to see in the manual. For more on these areas, see "Self-instruction in Language Learning" by Leslie Dickinson (CUP).
3. Institution of a computer-based system of classifying resources, to which students, as well as teachers, would have access. We are looking at text retrieval and database systems. This has implications that go well beyond Freestyle.
4. More training for teachers in the necessary counselling skills which are distinct from those of classroom management.
5. Expansion of Freestyle resources to include conversation circles to boost fluency; at present we are only helping with the knowledge/accuracy end of the learning spectrum. This, though, would require an extra room so that 'chatterers' would not disturb 'studiers'. As with 1. above, this would also partly depend on there being sufficient demand to justify the allocation of a separate room.

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