YORK
ASSOCIATES

Learner Training for Language Learners

Steve Flinders

TESOL France

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PREAMBLE

This was a rather curious talk for me since I more or less threw away my original script in order to focus on one or two key messages which I was very keen to reiterate. I still don't know if this was the right thing to do. Perhaps people who were there could give me their feedback. However, for those who were good enough to turn out, here is an attempt to summarise what I did say and some extensive notes on what I didn't.

PLAN

Introduction: Some reflections on effective learning and teaching.

1.   What is learner training? What is learner autonomy?
2.   Trends in effective learning?
3.   Learner training at different stages in course design and delivery
4.   Images and metaphors for language learners
5.   Learner training checklists

Acknowledgement
Some references
Appendix: A good language leaner is someone who . . .

INTRODUCTION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

I spent the larger part of the time dealing with some basic presuppositions concerning what we do as teachers and how far learners understand the language learning process and understand what we are trying to do when we teach.

Building successful international relationships
The company for which I work, York Associates, aims to help people build positive relationships internationally by providing training in the areas of:

- Specialist language knowledge
- Professional communication skills
- Professional content (for example, human resources)
- Intercultural communication

Developing learner autonomy through learner training should also be, I think, a vital ingredient in the process of increasing learning and communicative effectiveness.

Maxims
However I believe that some learners understand as little about language learning as language teachers do about buying a used car or basic science and that we all too easily forget to see the need for bridges between what we understand and what they don't, let alone to build them properly.

We think in shapes and colours, they think in numbers.

I insisted on the importance of some key words and key maxims or mantras (worth repeating over and over, in the style used by Sogyal Rinpoche, author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*).

Real learning
Real learning requires an effective combination of:
- Belief: *There is no failure, only feedback.*
- Attitude: *Give a new skill attention*
- Technique: *What techniques do they (other successful learners) use?*

Reassessment
It also requires us to constantly reassess how we learn, how our students learn and how we teach:

If what you're doing isn't working, try something different.

This is worth repeating over and over.

Motivation and commitment
How can we get students to take their learning seriously outside the classroom?

Often, I think the most important thing we can achieve is to get them to commit, to contract to work on their English regularly.

Little and often.

Practice:
Do it. What learning would challenge me and require me to break normal patterns of behaviour? – knitting? astrophysics? money management?

Theodore Zeldin
To help not lose sight of this essential focus, look at what Theodore Zeldin says about conversation. On the transformational power of dialogue:

"For me, it is not individuals (or the masses) who change the world, but twosomes . . . Big changes are superficial unless they are the sum of a lot of changes in the way we understand and treat one another. Our life stories are dominated by the encounters we have had with particular individuals, and by our constant search for new encounters."

" . . the new kind of conversation . . . is a more intimate encounter, which creates a bond of respect between the participants, and is valued as a way of getting inside another person's skin, with the likelihood that one will be changed by the experience. . . Every time you have a conversation which achieves that, the world is changed by a minute amount."

Oxford Today Michaelmas 1999

On the 'human audit':

"His human audit involves prolonged conversations . . . (he) prepares no questions. His approach is personal . . . His ability to draw out people's feelings, he believes, hinges on the way he listens. . . . 'I do not interrogate or interview, but engage people in a discussion about the topics that matter most to them . . . The conversation usually ends with an amazing spark – people come out with a statement that makes everything else mean something different. They surprise themselves.' "

People Management 28 October 1999

Dogme
Go to www.teaching-unplugged.com to find out more about the Dogme vow of chastity taken by teachers like Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings in an attempt to get back to the basics and to re-establish real communication with and between your students.

And remember the primary school child who said at the beginning of the new year:

How can we make each other happier this year?

1. WHAT IS LEARNER TRAINING? WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

Learner training

"Enabling learners of English to discover the learning strategies that suit them best, so that they can learn more effectively."

- from the blurb for *Learning to Learn English: a Course in Learner Training* by Gail Ellis and Barbara Sinclair. Cambridge University Press 1989.

"*Learning to Learn English* aims to help you:
-      become a more effective learner of English
-      take on more responsibility for your own learning
by helping you to consider factors which may affect your language learning . . . "

Learner autonomy

"No two learners actually require the same kind of amount of training to master a language effectively" (Narcy et *al*).

"The ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec): to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning:

- Determining objectives
- Defining contents and the progression
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used
- Evaluating what has been required

"Autonomy crucially depends on the learner's developing capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little). Radical implications:

- "A challenge to the established power structures of society" (Little)
- A more powerful tool than the school learning and unconscious learning that most of us engage in.

"Every learner-trainer's dilemma is how to best help learners discover their most satisfactory way of learning without stifling the very independence they are trying to develop" (Nancy et *al*).

"The Resource Centre is a key component in helping learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed for learning how to learn English" (Bertoldi et *al*).

"One does not ordinarily bring about change in basic orientations in learning without some conflict or antagonism" (Smith and Haverkamp cited in Bertoldi et *al*).

"It is vital to know to what extent the difficulties experienced by the weaker learner are due to an inability to learn languages per se, and how far at least part of the problem lies in an inappropriately applied, unsophisticated or incomplete set of learning strategies" (Porte).

2. TRENDS IN EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Categorisations of learners and learning

VAKOG
Visual   learning through seeing, reading, writing
Auditory   learning through hearing
Kinaesthetic   learning through touch and movement, games and drama . . .
Olfactory
Gustatory

See Jim Chamberlain in Some references.

Oxford and Anderson
Global   analytic
Field dependent   independent
Feeling   thinking
Impulsive   reflective
Intuitive random   concrete-sequential
Closure oriented   open
Extroverted   introverted
Visual   auditory   hands-on

Howard Gardner's eight multiple intelligences
Musical
Bodily-kinaesthetic
Logical-mathematical
Linguistic
Spatial
Interpersonal
Interpersonal
Naturalist

See Jim Chamberlain in Some references.

Ideas about behavioural change and development: some other techniques

Modelling the future
(Clive Wilson, Primeast) (Ask me for details if you're interested)

Self modelling
- Think about something you don't do very well and would like to do better
- Imagine yourself doing it better
- Think about the things that stop you doing it better
- Think about ways in which you could do these things better
- Make a resolution
- Make an action plan.

NLP
See: Some references.

Accelerated learning
See: Some references.

3. LEARNER TRAINING AT DIFFERENT STAGES IN THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS

Some questions about the training and learning process:

Before the course

Making the decision: the business plan

What is the problem?
Can it be analysed?
Is it quantifiable?

Treat your learning like a business project:

Learning English for you is a professional need. How big a priority is your English?
- Very high
- High
- Not very high
- Low

How much time do you normally allocate to a project with this level of priority?

Do the two answers fit? If not, think again.

And for training / HR managers:

How far is the training plan for Mr / Ms X integrated into:
- his/her professional development plan?
- the organisation's competence development plan?

The ROI

What return on your training investment are you aiming to achieve?:

Where are you on the ROI curve?
- for professional language
- for communication skills
- for intercultural competence

(Or would the global return be higher if your native speaker interlocutors received training in international English?)

Needs analysis

The conventional range of needs analysis questions:
- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?

Plus the HOW?:

- How many languages do you speak? How well?
- Tell me about your experience of learning foreign languages? →
- Tell me about your experience of learning English at school?
- Tell me about positive / negative experiences of language learning.
- How do you learn languages?
- How do you learn in other situations?
- What do you like learning?
- What are you good at learning?
- What are the biggest challenges (problems!) you face in learning a language?

Your learning plan

What is your plan for learning English? What is your strategy?

What are your goals?
- general: how good do you want to be?
- specific: in what areas do you want to improve your competence?

What is the time plan?
What resources do you have? (i.e. how much time?)

At the start of the course

As far as possible, always look at the process as well as the content.

The high risk strategy

Before you start, ask:
- How motivated are you to do this course?
- How high are your expectations of this course?

And then ask them again at the end.

During the course

How much time do you give to learner training during a course?
How much time would you like to give to it?

The trainer can ask questions, for example, for homework, and write down both the questions and – eventually - the answers in order to create, cumulatively, a learning contract for each learner.

For example, this sample answer to one question about learning: *What do you do when you don't know a word (that you need in conversation)?* elicited this list:

- Reformulate: if necessary, go back and start again
- Use your hands
- Draw pictures
- Show objects
- Use your own language, write down words in your own language
- Use other languages that you know
- Smile
- Improvise]

I ask questions like these for various language areas and write down students' answers:

Vocabulary

How many English words do you know? →
What does it mean to know a word?
How many English words can you use?
Where do you find the vocabulary you want to learn?
How do your organise you vocabulary?
How do you learn new words?
- does it help you to write them down?
- (does writing them down help you to remember them or to forget them more effectively?)
- does it help you to hear them frequently?
- does it help you to do vocabulary exercises? If so, what type? (For the trainer: point out different exercise types)

What other ways can you think of to learn vocabulary?

<u>Reading</u>

How useful do you think it is to read aloud regularly? What is it useful for?

And I guide students to what I think are the right answers too! For example:

<u>Read, read, read:</u>
1. *Read about subjects that you know about.*
2. *Read about subjects which interest you.*
3. *Read about subjects that you enjoy.*
4. *Read actively:*
- *use a highlighter*
- *look at word combinations*
- *think about the process as well as the content.*
5. *Read aloud.*

<u>Speaking</u>

How can you learn to speak better?
Do you listen to yourself speaking?
What do you do when you don't know a word?
How important is accuracy?
What is a mistake?
Why is grammar important?

<u>General</u>

What are you enjoying most about this course?
What are you enjoying least?
What can you say about <u>how</u> you learn in each of these areas, as well as <u>what</u> you learn?
How can you improve your ability to listen / speak / read / write <u>actively</u> rather than <u>passively</u>?

At the end of the course

<u>The high risk strategy revisited</u>

Ask again:
- How motivated are you still to go on learning English?
- How far have your expectations of this course been met?

- as a quality check.
- as a way-in to further self-monitoring.

<u>Planning</u>

What will your new targets be after the end of your course?
- long term
- medium term
- short term

4. IMAGES AND METAPHORS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Is it useful to use metaphors relating to the language learning process?
How many of these can you interpret?
What can you add to the list?

The plateau
The mountain
The spiral staircase
The wall
The half empty glass
The golf swing
The jigsaw puzzle
Giving up smoking
The nuclear physicist
The red traffic light
The spoon and the window (from ethnographic surveys)
Rewiring the software
The duck
SARAH

5. LEARNER TRAINING CHECKLISTS

Key words for learners

VISION!

TARGETS
The learners with the most clearly formulated objectives are the ones who are most likely to reach them.

METHOD
The learners who are most involved in the design and direction of their courses are the ones most likely to make progress.

MOTIVATION

"Motivation is the motor for learning" (from *Helping Students to Learn* by Ricky Lowe and Francesca Target, Richmond Publishing 1998)

PLAN → PRACTISE → REVIEW
(From Ellis and Sinclair)

SELF BELIEF
The learners who believe they can do it, will do it.

Questions I (try to) ask myself

How can I learn more about the learning style of my students?
How can I raise my student's expectations about and belief in how much they can learn?
(= How can I get them to learn more?!)
What successful learning models can I present to them?
How can I get them to model successful learning to themselves?
How do I want each of my learners to change?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX: A GOOD LEARNER IS SOMEONE WHO…
- Tries
- Has a realistic expectations about what is involved
- Has a good memory
- Is a good mimic
- Is motivated
- Feels positive about the people who speak the target language
- Is willing to take risks / make mistakes
- Is (linguistically) self-confident
- Has a good ear
- Has a good teacher
- Can find another way to say what s/he can't say straightaway
- Makes the effort to learn grammar (rules) and / or vocabulary list(s)
- Devises, organises and sticks to a learning programme
- Uses a dictionary thinks about how s/he learns
- Sets learning goals
- Uses mnemonics
- Uses etymology

(From: *How to Learn Languages for International Business*. Steve Flinders. Falcon Press Down to Business Minimax 2000.)