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**SETTING CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR
FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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SETTING CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS.

Practical and theoretical implications of fostering greater learner autonomy within the school and university system

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss some of the merits and limitations of setting realistic and clear objectives for foreign language learners, from the specification of a practically applicable syllabus based on language use rather than language knowledge to the step-by-step grading of such a syllabus in order to focus attention more closely on the learner.

Firstly, I intend to deal with some of the limitations of the more traditional ways of teaching foreign languages and attempt to form a satisfactory definition of language in its wider social context, as opposing its narrower 'grammatical' context of the traditional language classroom. Such a characterisation is, I feel, necessary first for an understanding of the failings of the traditional approaches to teaching foreign languages, and second in implementing a successful teaching programme.

Secondly, an approach which proposes more realistic objectives for language learners will be examined, based on their specific communicative needs, as provided in a functional/notional type syllabus. The theoretical background is followed by a brief assessment of the results of the Schools Councils Project in North Yorkshire (Buckby *et al.* 1981), before examining the role of the teacher in the implementation of such schemes and the types of task based, learner centred activity which could be envisaged within the framework of such schemes.

Thirdly, the value of more learner-centred approaches is discussed with specific reference to those factors which may influence the language learning process and how greater autonomy can be fostered in the language learner as he or she takes on more responsibility for his or her learning.

Views of language in the learning process

It has long been apparent that more traditional methods of teaching foreign languages fail to achieve satisfactory levels of success. Numbers of school leavers move into the academic or professional world without having attained a marked degree of proficiency in a foreign language, many of them being unable

to carry out basic communicative tasks with either competence or confidence.

These less than adequate results have led to a much needed reappraisal of the way in which foreign languages are taught. There have been considerable changes in the way language itself is viewed, particularly in the classroom situation. There has been a move from an emphasis on purely linguistic competence, which is here intended as a purely grammatical or abstract knowledge of the foreign language, to one of "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1979: 15), or language seen as the product of the environment in which we live, linguistic acceptability within that environment being dictated not only by knowledge of grammatical rules, but the complex rules of human interaction, i.e. language perceived as "behavioural" (Wilkins, 1976:13). The result of such a viewpoint is a more communicative approach to language teaching, taking into account "the rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes, 1979: 15).

Such an approach does, however, tend to be characterised by a certain vagueness and Van Ek (1975) attempts to fill this gap by setting out a series of well-defined objectives to serve as a more solid basis for the application of a more communicative approach to language teaching. The adapted results of such studies were applied with success at British secondary school level in the Oxfordshire (Miller, 1980) and North Yorkshire (Buckby *et al.* 1981) areas. Very quickly extensive application of these ideas was taking place in more than sixty schemes throughout Britain (Bird, 1982: 65).

The starting point for such studies must be with a clear idea of what 'language' is, as this will necessarily affect the way it is taught. Clearly, learning a language is a mammoth task, and one of the aims of a course of study is to break the language down into more manageable elements. Previously the criteria for such a breakdown were almost exclusively grammatical, what Wilkins (1976: 2) terms a "synthetic approach". The overall objective of such an approach is to gradually build up learners' grammatical knowledge of the target language until it reached native speaker level. Theoretically, with a solid grammatical base to work on, learners should be able to generate an infinite number of utterances, in much the same way as native speakers do. In practice this is not the case, as learners are developing an almost exclusively passive 'knowledge' of the target language, without developing the necessary 'skills' to activate this knowledge in communicative interaction. Essentially, if language is broken down into its grammatical elements, these elements taught step by step, mean very little in themselves, and only when all these elements have been learned can the whole (i.e. the target language) be reconstructed and admired in its entirety. Learning a language in this way has been likened

to climbing a mountain. As Harding et al (1980: 8) point out: "A major drawback is that one cannot admire the view until one has reached the top".

Learners become disillusioned with a lack of progress, as it seems they are not achieving any concrete results for their learning efforts. The language they are learning cannot be put to any immediate practical use.

In many ways the legacy of the 'grammatical element' approach is still being paid, affecting syllabus design and examination format in particular. Even the so-called 'communicative approach' to language teaching is in many cases little more than a structurally oriented approach in communicative guise. This is illustrated by the frequent use of specifically designed dialogues used to present specific grammatical structures. The result is often stilted and unnatural, and certainly not communicative. There are many constraints placed on how syllabuses are designed and then chosen for particular institutions and organisations, not least the requirements of state examinations. These factors necessarily affect the way foreign languages are taught.

The area of language learning raises its own specific problems. Esch (1997: 166), for instance, claims that learning a second or foreign language is different from learning other subject matter:

Is language learning different from any other learning, say physics or geography? The answer is yes because we use language to describe and talk about our learning experience. In any community, language constitutes a powerful vehicle for culturally transmitted views of language, of learning, and of learning situations. This makes it very difficult to get out of the straitjacket and to become autonomous. A clear example is the use of words such as 'rules' and 'grammar' in discourse. [...] Our conceptualisation of learning a new language is crucially affected by these views but often we are unaware of them. Becoming more autonomous amounts to realising the extent to which language use constrains and restricts our views about language and language learning.

There are two important points here. Firstly, the traditional teaching of languages tends to be very much rule governed. Secondly, because language is the vehicle through which we learn, in this case the foreign language itself, it is very much tied up with our attitudes and emotions. This is dealt with later in the paper.

Attention now turns to the reasons why language instruction so often falls back on a rule based approach, even when paying lip-service to more communicative and learner-centred type approaches.

Numerous studies have been carried out into how the second language learner acquires language, usually based on the sequentiality of the language

acquisition process, as hypothesised by Selinker (1972) in his theory of inter-language as a systematic progression, or "the structurally intermediate status of the learner's language system between mother tongue and target language [...]" (Corder, 1978: 63). A further example would be the morpheme studies carried out by Dulay and Burt (1974). Although it may be possible to identify a certain systematicity in the language acquisition process, attempts to replicate the above types of study frequently arrive at contradictory results, and from a pedagogical point of view, the limited scope of such studies fails to provide a sound basis for the design of overall programmes of language improvement:

We have now scores of descriptive studies covering many odds and ends, bits and pieces of learner's language chosen for analysis because they caught the researcher's eye, seemed to exhibit some systematicity, or confirmed some intuition one had about SLA. Such research has, in fact confirmed that there are patterns of regularity in learner's developing interlanguage.

(Lightbrown, 1984, cited in Ellis, 1986: 285)

Unfortunately, viewing language learning from only this perspective is severely limiting, in that it amounts to the following type of process:

The learner was seen as constructing for himself [*sic*] a grammar of the target language on the basis of the linguistic data in the language to which he was exposed and the help he received from teaching.

(Corder, 1978: 62)

A further problem is the desire to discover a universal process which may have generalisable applications in language instruction. Indeed, it is often frustratingly difficult for the teacher who comes up against a class of students who all seem to learn differently. This is because if universal principles of language acquisition are applied to the language learning process, the result often tends to be that:

Most learners [...] are required to do the same things at more or less the same time and in more or less the same order.

(Littlejohn, 1985: 255)

This tendency in planning language courses, placing a heavy bias on sequentially programmed linguistic content, pushes into the background the learner's reaction to that content. Once again this leads to a policy of quanti-

fyng a student's progress on the basis of outcomes (progress tests and exam results) rather than examining the process by which he or she achieves those results. This inevitably reflects upon the teaching approach adopted, tailored to a general public in the hope that it will satisfy the needs of the majority:

Devising syllabuses through needs-analysis involves classifying the learner as a member of a particular occupational or social category. The personal interests and wishes of the learner are thus overridden. In addition, since the resulting syllabus is based on an analysis of the end-of-course situation of the learner, no room is allowed for needs that emerge during the learning process, or indeed for any challenge that takes place in the end-of-course situation. Thus, although a needs-analysis approach to syllabus design does not imply any particular classroom methodology, it is clear that a tightly specified syllabus can in reality turn out to be a strait-jacket for both teacher and learner.

(*ibid.*: 254)

In fact, in the classroom what is important is a shift of focus from the sequence in which the learner acquires the language, especially considering the incomplete and 'bitty' nature of research carried out into language acquisition sequences up to the present time, towards the process by which this is brought about.

Setting clear objectives

Graded objectives provide a radical alternative to the above approaches. Instead of considering language as consisting of a series of grammatical building blocks, it could be broken down into a series of integrated blocks of meaningful language, in much the same way as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the content of each block being based on clearly defined criteria including grammatical and communicative content. Each 'piece' could represent a self-contained segment having a value *per se*, in that elements from it may be used separately or in combination for practical communicative purposes.

A useful starting point for such a syllabus would be to view language from a functional/notional point of view as in Van Ek's 'Threshold' (1975) and 'Waystage' (1977) levels, which may also be found as a point of reference in the Council of Europe's Common European Framework.

There is, of course, the danger that an approach of this type produces nothing more than a general list of phrases, something similar to what is

found in a tourist's phrase book. The mechanical learning of set expressions has only limited use, at best producing:

a highly ritualised transactional use of language which will neither encourage learners to express their own feelings, nor encourage them to generate any language beyond learned-by-heart phrases with perhaps a few variations in vocabulary.

(Miller, 1988:31)

At worst such learning could produce phrases whose form has been mastered, but whose full range of meanings according to context or relationship of speakers has not, with embarrassing or even offensive results. The parroting of phrases results in what Bird (1982: 63) terms "language-like behaviour".

According to Van Ek (1976:19) the learner's general aim should be "to survive linguistically speaking, in temporary contacts with foreign language speakers in everyday situations, whether as visitors to the foreign country or with visitors to one's own country, and to establish and maintain social contacts". This clearly demands a higher degree of proficiency than a pure mastery of a number of set expressions. Learners should be equipped to deal with a variety of situations, and be able to adapt their linguistic knowledge to suite their communicative needs or to cope with the unexpected, since human interaction is highly unpredictable. The learner must develop his or her creativity in language use and manipulative skills to cover social (e.g. friend/friend; stranger/stranger) relationships and psychological (e.g. neutral; sympathy; antipathy) roles (Van Ek, 1975: 17-18). Such goals would be impossible in a 'phrase book' approach.

If the general functions of language are taken as a starting point in devising a language-learning programme, it is also necessary to take into account the tools with which we carry out these functions or the concepts which run behind the language that is used. Wilkins (1976) proposes a syllabus based on more semantic or "notional" aspects of language, rather than purely grammatical aspects, whereby language has an underlying set of notions, such as time, quantity and space (Wilkins, 1979: 86-87), which are applied in a general way throughout the language system, while more specific notions cover specific topic areas (Trim, 1980: 25).

In practice such a teaching programme would be centred on realistic and purposeful communication tasks and make use of authentic materials in order to expose the learners to as much potential input as possible. Wilkins refers to this wider type of exposure to the target language as an "analytic approach", in which even from the beginning of the learning programme: "the learner's

task is to approximate his [*sic*] own linguistic behaviour more and more closely to the global language". (Wilkins, 1976: 2)

By dividing the programme into a set of realistic and achievable steps, the learner's motivation can be increased considerably, as he or she can see that progress is being made and especially if this progress is perceived as being of practical use. As such it is necessary to take into account the individual needs of the learner, or as Trim (1980: 9) believes in a "democratic" approach to language teaching:

by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of learners and enabling them as far as possible to steer and control their own progress, we [The Council of Europe] can encourage teachers and learners to take the decisions that directly affect them.

This shift means that the starting point in the organisation of a learning programme should be the learner and not the language to be taught (Miller, 1988: 30). Language is the product of the individual influenced by internal (the mental processes leading to the production of language) and external (the environment in which the language is to be used) factors.

It is now generally accepted that allowances should be made for learner differences. Language learners have different rates of development and they take different routes to acquiring a foreign language (Ellis, 1986: 154-161), and making allowances for such diversity calls for an enormous degree of flexibility within the learning programme. This is one of the reasons why a purely grammatical approach to language teaching has endured so long. It is easier to test factual knowledge than it is to evaluate communicative proficiency. Unfortunately by testing such factual knowledge emphasis tends to be placed on what learners do not know, rather than on what they do know (Trim, 1980: 13) with negative effects on the attitudes and motivation of the learners.

This kind of problem is particularly common in the state sector, and experiments with graded objectives in the early eighties in British schools were intended to find ways of demonstrating to lower ability learners, who often felt they were "not good enough to continue" (Harding et al. 1980: 3) with their foreign language studies, that it was possible to "experience success in language learning" (*ibid.*: 3).

In the project carried out in North Yorkshire (Buckby *et al.*, 1981) experimental groups of pupils followed communicatively oriented courses, based loosely on functional categories outlined in Van Ek's "Threshold" (1975) and "Waystage" (1977) levels. At various intervals, these pupils were

able to take achievement tests emphasising the practical use of language. For instance, at level 3 tasks included making arrangements to meet people, meeting people, going to a chemist's in case of minor illness and going to a lost property office (Buckby *et al.*, 1981: 57). Certificates were awarded on passing each level, each certificate stating exactly what the pupils had achieved. In this way the pupils could monitor their progress closely, knowing at what stage in the language learning programme they had arrived, and perhaps more important knowing exactly what they could achieve in linguistic terms. Such an approach bears comparison with the unit/credit scheme proposed by Trim (1980), in which:

a pattern of generalised courses and global examinations developed for the schools is inappropriate. A better study framework can be provided if a given subject matter can be articulated into elements which can be grouped in different ways by different classes of learners in accordance with their needs and interests. Intelligent choice is then possible and can perhaps be encouraged by recognising some coherent combinations of elements as constituting *units* of study. Where the mastery of such a unit is relevant to the acquisition of some formal qualification, *credits* can be awarded, allowing the qualification to be gained in a variety of ways appropriate to varying, but congruent, patterns of study and needs.

(Trim 1973: 102)

Bird (1982: 64) refers to the problems of defining communicative proficiency satisfactorily for the evaluation of the kinds of tasks carried out in the above tests, and the view could be taken that grammatical accuracy is sacrificed to permit the completion of the task. Standardised criteria for the assessment of communicative tests are necessary if such tests are to have widely recognised credibility.

This approach is, however, certainly more *democratic* than previous approaches. In the case of the above project, the pupils decided, in consultation with their teachers, when they were ready to take a particular test. To an extent this would release pupils from exam pressure and eliminate the stigma attached to being 'ranked' within the class, as tests were "designed to record achievement, not to produce rank order" (Bird, 1982: 62). Even those pupils unfortunate enough to fail a graded test "proved to have attitudes just as positive as those who had passed" (Buckby *et al.* 1981: 46). Indeed, general enthusiasm for foreign language study increased markedly.

Motivation was enhanced not only by pupils' clearer idea of exactly what objectives were to be achieved and what practical applications these objec-

tives might have, but also by the fact that they were actively involved in how the learning process was structured, the syllabus being more closely aligned to their perceived needs than previously and account being taken of individual learner differences.

One problem with making such allowances for learner differences, may be that more able learners suffer, as work will tend to progress at a pace suited to lower ability learners. Additional, more demanding work could be provided for faster learners and they could be permitted to pass on to tests at higher levels. This would, of course, be extremely difficult to administer and might result in less able learners ranking themselves below faster learners, with possible detrimental effects on their motivation. In mixed-ability classes this is to a certain extent inevitable.

Centring attention on the learner

A learner-centred approach to language teaching allows for more than a mechanical mastery of the skills necessary to carry out day to day tasks, but also the ability to express emotions, feelings and opinions. The learner should ideally be allowed to develop his or her own linguistic identity. Innate personality factors:

operate deep within the personality of the learner, and the language teacher's purpose is to link the integrated and internal needs of the learner to the external demands of society.

(Brumfit, 1979: 190)

The role of the teacher is of vital importance in this approach, as he or she ceases to be the central focus of all classroom activities, where all classroom interaction emanates from his or her cues, and becomes the co-ordinator of task based activities through which learners obtain a greater awareness of their own linguistic ability through developing language skills in meaningful communicative tasks. Allwright (1979) implemented such a programme for foreign students beginning their studies at the University of Essex, and who felt that their knowledge of English was inadequate for them to pursue their studies effectively. Rather than a purely grammar based programme, which in previous years had always produced a high drop-out rate, students worked with material from the university handbook which was seen as relevant to their immediate needs. Inter-student interaction was encouraged with the use of problem solving activities and groupwork. In this way:

by taking the focus completely off the language as content and putting it into orientation problems or otherwise trivial but intriguing communication games, we paradoxically succeeded in drawing attention to the language and motivating intense concentration on its complexities.

(Allwright, 1977: 179)

A criticism that could be levelled at this freer approach to language 'discovery' is that while it certainly encourages the development of foreign language communication skills, it may at the same time not develop an acceptable degree of grammatical accuracy. The language produced by a learner must be comprehensible to the native speaker or the intended audience. If too much emphasis is placed on the function and not the form of the language being studied, there could be the danger of a form of "classroom pidgin" (Bird, 1982: 64) developing. It may be true that accuracy comes with ample communicative practice, but such constraints as limited time and the classroom environment, which in many cases may not be conducive to genuine and spontaneous interaction, must be considered. There should not, however, be confusion between some reference towards accuracy within the framework of a communicative type syllabus and "inflexibility" (Brumfit, 1979: 187), leading to a consequent lack of learner language creativity.

Overall, a learner-centred approach to syllabus design and to teaching serves to decrease the psychological distance between the learner and the teacher. Firstly, the syllabus is viewed by the learner as being suited to his or her needs. For the teacher, who has presumably had some part in its development in a democratic approach, he or she feels involved in a dynamic and creative process, which would contrast starkly with the processes involved in the teaching of a syllabus imposed by an outside agency with little or no understanding of the needs of his or her students. Secondly, if the teacher works closely with the learner, for example in discussing individual progress and readiness to take graded tests, as in the Schools Councils Project in North Yorkshire (Buckby *et al.* 1981), he or she becomes immediately more accessible to the learner. The teacher's role becomes supportive rather than wholly evaluative and judgmental. In her investigation of student attitudes to their learning Cotterall (1999: 507) observes:

Subjects responses to items which investigated the role of the teacher reflect their acceptance of shared responsibility (with the teacher) for their learning, and their recognition of the teacher's ability to show students how to learn as the key attribute of a language teacher.

This role is defined by Gremmo and Riley (1995:159) as more a "councillor" than teacher in the strictest traditional sense.

If focus is now turned towards the learner, then a starting point may be to investigate what contributes to making a good language learner. Naiman *et al.* (1978, cited in Wenden, 1986: 12) identify what they consider to be a series of factors which constitute good language learners. They are able to find and employ a learning style that suits them, they are actively involved in the learning process, they possess analytical skills which allow them to examine the target language in order to understand its workings, they understand that language is a tool to be used for communication and finally they are aware of the fact that learning a language is not a simple process.

This ideal language learner is not conditioned solely by purely linguistic aspects of the learning process. The key seems to be that the above learner is both *aware* and *active* in this process. Conscious learner awareness would seem to lead to concrete and productive action. The combination of these two points is perhaps the key to learner autonomy.

However, not all learners are ideal, and it is often, if not always, the teacher's task in the classroom to deal with a variety of learners who possess a variety of different backgrounds and attitudes to the target language. These learners will consequently have different perceptions of what it entails to learn a second or foreign language.

One of the problems is that learners "do not always realise that learning a language means being able to use it as well as knowing about it, and that at a certain point it is no longer a matter of knowledge but of meaningful practice" (Wenden, 1986: 9). In part this is because:

There is a widespread belief that in order to learn one has to be taught. Learners thus normally expect the teacher to organise the learning task for them, and they see the teacher as possessor of a body of knowledge which he or she must transmit to them.

(Littlejohn, 1985: 256)

This view is further sustained by Tadeu de Silva *et al.* (1993: 43), who view this perception as severely limiting since it fails to take into account "the always conflictual, socially constructed nature of knowledge by reducing it to a mausoleum of dead facts".

A second point is that learners need both to be aware of and be given the opportunity to build on their previous learning experiences. Consequently they:

[...] need to learn to seek relationships between previous learning activities

(or pedagogical tasks) and the current task to determine whether the principle related to strategy use for these previous tasks is applicable to this new task.
(Wenden, 1995: 189)

Moreover, Dickinson (1995) observes that the learner's perception of success and failure has a significant effect on the learning process. Again this is based on the learner's beliefs about learning and the learning process, which is conditioned by previous experience, by factors which are attributed to performance outcomes. This is referred to as "attribution theory" (Weiner, 1991, cited in Dörnyei, 2001: 22). Such a theory has importance in the context of acquiring autonomy, since:

The central tenet of attribution theory is the learner's perception of the course of his or her success or failure and *the influence this has on perception of future performance*.

(Dickinson, 1995: 171. The italics are mine)

This will affect not only the way in which the learner approaches the problem of acquiring knowledge, but also his or her attitude towards learning.

Attempts have been made to identify what a learner may bring to this process in terms of the kinds of strategies that he or she will employ in tackling the problem of language learning, and to what extent these strategies may be 'teachable'. Wenden (1986:10) identifies two strategies:

Learning strategies are defined as steps or mental operations used in learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials in order to store, retrieve, and use knowledge. Communication strategies refer to techniques learners use when there is a gap between their knowledge of the language and their communicative intent.

In a general sense, therefore, a strategy may be construed as a conscious course of action taken in order to overcome a problem. If it is conscious and identifiable, it should thus be also teachable. The two strategies mentioned above can, moreover, be further broken down. Griffiths and Parr (2001: 251) describe six strategies (*memory, compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, affective* and *social*) based on Oxford (1990). Memorisation techniques and the ability to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge are clear strategies which can be developed with the help of instruction. It is not common for text books to focus attention on memorisation techniques or vocabulary in particular. This could include keeping an alphabetically

topic ordered vocabulary book, attaching labels to everyday objects, using flip cards with the target language word on one side and the mother tongue equivalent on the other, associating pictures and words, extensive reading or even studying the dictionary. In the second case, learners can be trained to guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary items from context or listen for gist. This type of strategy could be defined as a *micro-strategy*, in that attention is focused on consciously developed abilities which are based on readily identifiable skills aimed at improving specific areas of linguistic knowledge.

However, the remaining four 'strategies' mentioned are problematic, in that they are more difficult to pin down as conscious actions and, in addition, they interact very closely one with the other. They may function in providing a bridge between the Chomskyan (1965) concept of *linguistic competence*, or "what the speaker actually knows, not what he may report about his [*sic*] knowledge" (*ibid.*: 8) and *linguistic performance*, or what the language user produces "with limitations of memory, time and access" (*ibid.*: 10). Thus, the overall competence of the language user "is dependent upon both (*tacit*) knowledge and (*ability for*) use" (Hymes, 1979: 19). Much of the confusion which arises in analysing cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social factors in language learning arises from the fact that they are often reduced to taxonomies of observable behaviour, that is to say easily classified elements of strategic action. This is a severely limiting view, since it often fails to take into account the individuality or personality of the learner, and as Benson (2001, 85-86) observes, these classifications:

do not simply describe observable learning behaviours. Often the capacities described go beyond learning management and are concerned with factors of personality and attitude. At the same time these factors are often described in such a way that the autonomous learner appears to be a particular kind of person, rather than a person who possesses particular cognitive skills or abilities that can be acquired.

It is therefore necessary to examine the four categorisations above in more detail. For the purposes of this paper they are considered as 'factors' which may influence a learner's level of autonomy in a holistic sense of the learning process, rather than strategies which can automatically and consciously be applied in order to acquire autonomy, which are more akin to aspects of self-regulated or self directed learning.

Cognitive factors

References to cognitive processes in language learning tend to be contradictory, ranging from consciously applicable skills to the innate capacity to process input. Barnett and Jordan (1991: 307) refer to the learner's "manipulation of learning materials in order to enhance learning and retention", giving as examples using "mnemonic devices, skimming and scanning, note-taking, and the combination of learned materials into new patterns", while Griffiths and Parr (2000: 251) simply refer to the process of "how students think about their learning". However, such views are severely limited, since in the first case the factors described only refer to observable behaviour, and in the second case there is no account of the process behind students' thinking.

Cognitive factors in language learning and their relevance to autonomy need to be examined on a deeper level. Ellis (1985: 114), for example, sees cognitive processes as "the manner in which people perceive, conceptualise, organise and recall information". This comprises an internal, and not necessarily externalisable, knowledge of how we process language input. As Tomlin and Villa (1994: 184, cited in Benson, 2001: 87) observe, it is part of our human condition to be surrounded by sources of input and it is necessary in some way to deal with this overload of information:

It is the human attention systems that reduce and control that influx of information. Within the more narrowly defined problem of SLA, we find the learner also overwhelmed by incoming L2 input, and it is virtual certainty that attention is employed to help sort out that input and to bring order to the chaos threatening to, and sometimes succeeding in, overwhelming the learner.

Benson (2001: 87) sees attention as one of "the fundamental psychological processes involved in autonomous learning" since it entails a degree of control over the mass of L2 input which potentially the learner has to deal with.

A further cognitive factor which Benson (*ibid.*) takes into consideration is the ability to reflect upon the learning experience, with particular reference to Kohonen (1992: 17, cited in Benson, 2001: 93), who claims:

Only experience that is reflected upon seriously will yield its full measure of learning, and reflection must in turn be followed by testing new hypotheses in order to obtain further experience. It can be argued, in fact, that theoretical concepts will not become part of the individual's frame of reference until

they have been experienced meaningfully on a subjective emotional level. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge, as it were, between experience and theoretical conceptualisation. The process of learning is seen as the recycling of experience at deeper levels of understanding and interpretation. This view entails the idea of lifelong learning.

Therefore, while attention aids the learner in organising input, reflection provides the concrete awareness necessary in order to take action. This takes us on to the next section.

Metacognitive factors

By contrast with the above, these strategies account for the learner's knowledge of how he or she goes about organising what he or she does in order to learn the language. While cognitive factors may be concerned with awareness, metacognitive factors are more closely linked to action, in that they are "mental operations used by learners in the self-management of their learning" (Benson, 2001: 82).

Wenden (1995:183) argues that learners already bring a basis of knowledge to the learning experience, and that this knowledge can be exploited in learner training. Of particular importance in this model for integrating learner training in the overall curriculum, is the concept of metacognitive knowledge. Cotterall (1995b) identifies two types of metacognitive knowledge:

Task knowledge is considered to include views of how language works and what tasks involve. *Strategic knowledge* includes both knowledge about strategies and an understanding of general principles which might determine strategy choice.

(*ibid.*: 201. The italics are mine)

Both types of knowledge have in common the fact that they are concrete and externalisable, therefore providing the basis for formulating strategies to overcome specific language learning problems. As a consequence learners acquire more control over their learning and, as Wenden (1995: 192) claims, such an awareness will affect attitudes towards taking on the responsibility of autonomy.

Below attention is focused on two specific kinds of learning strategy, aimed at encouraging the growth of learner autonomy.

- *Task strategies*. Wenden (1995) sees the task as central to the learning

process, and that learners need to be able to deal with tasks effectively if they are to benefit in any way from the experience. Consequently they need to be aware of why they need to carry out a learning task, what type of task it is, and the procedure for carrying out the task. On the basis of these principles, it is feasible to break down a task into a set of procedures. For example, Kenny (1993) lists a number of factors which come into play in carrying out a piece of work. In the first place the learner needs to be able to initiate the process and he or she should have the capacity to plan the piece of work and justify choices made in the planning phase. The learner should also develop a critical sense of his or her own work and that of others and be able to communicate effectively. In addition, the learner should be able to interact with others, both in requesting help if necessary and co-operating with others.

- *Self-assessment and evaluation strategies.* Cotterall (1995b: 199) defines this as "self-monitoring behaviour". In this sense, such knowledge puts the learner in a position of organising and taking action on his or her study. It will also include the ability to fix clear objectives, assess progress, success and failure.

Although objections may be raised as to the subjectivity of self-assessment procedures, evidence put forward by Bachman and Palmer (1989), in their comparison of learner self-rating and traditional, externally motivated assessment of learner language proficiency, would seem to point to "sizeable correlations between the self-rating method factor and the other two method factors (interview and writing/multiple choice)" (*ibid.*: 16). This view is further supported by Oscarson (1989), who identifies a number of direct benefits of the ability to self-assess. Firstly it acts as a motivating factor, in that the learner can make "reliable and autonomous judgements on the effectiveness of his [*sic*] communication" (Trim, 1980: ix, cited in Oscarson, 1989: 4). Secondly the learner becomes more aware of the learning process, rather than the product. He or she is constrained to think about how and why a process is carried out, rather than only taking into consideration the end result. This in turn allows the learner to set realistic objectives in his or her learning during a given course and, moreover, provide a basis for further independent language study once the course has finished (*ibid.*: 5).

Affective factors

This concerns the learner's attitude to learning and to the target language. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 46-47) claim:

Learning, particularly the learning of a language, is an emotional experience, and the feelings that the learning process evokes will have a crucial bearing on the success or failure of the learning.

In order to be successful in language learning, or any other kind of learning for that matter, Breen and Mann (1997: 134) claim that he or she needs to have a "robust sense of self". This gives the learner a sense of independence which allows him or her to take responsibility for the learning process:

A person who is taking an autonomous position towards learning a language in a classroom is someone whose capacity to learn and whose success at learning will be independent of the educational processes taking place there.
(*ibid.*: 135)

Cotterall (1999: 509) refers to this as "self-efficacy", and identifies it as an important quality in the successful learner. The less successful learner tended to lack confidence in carrying out learning tasks and evaluating their own progress.

Further to this, the successful learner will also tend to be motivated in learning the language. Motivation has been identified as a central factor in the success of learning. Key work into motivation and language learning was carried out by Gardner and Lambert (1972), who viewed "second languages as mediating factors between different ethnolinguistic cultures in multicultural settings and, accordingly, considered the motivation to learn the language of the other community to be a primary force responsible for enhancing or hindering intercultural communication and affiliation" (Dörnyei, 2001: 48), or as Dickinson (1995: 167) defines it a "social-psychological approach".

Dickinson (*ibid.*: 168) sees motivation from a slightly different perspective, in that she believes that characteristics of motivation may be universal to the study of all subject matter and not specific to languages. She prefers to examine Deci and Ryan's (1985) "cognitive" (Dickinson 1995: 168) model of motivation which has as its central tenet the student's desire to learn. Here a distinction is drawn between motivation which is internally driven and motivation which could be considered externally imposed. An enlightening example is given of two language learners with differing attitudes towards the

problem of learning. The first case is of the "extrinsically" motivated Mary, who studies before lessons because it is required by the teacher. The second is the "intrinsically" motivated Susan who studies because she perceives the process as acquiring or improving existent skills and learning itself has a personal value. The anxiety Mary feels when she is preparing a lesson is no doubt a significant affective factor in limiting her progress, but what is particularly notable is the fact that when there is a break from formal teaching, she stops studying with a certain sense of relief, while Susan continues, even without the 'threat' of teacher or institutional control hanging over her head (*ibid.*: 169).

However, such models tend to extend little further than the descriptive, and more recent work by Dörnyei and Ottó (1998, cited in Dörnyei, 2001: 85) addresses the problem of how motivation can also be viewed as a process. They view motivation from two perspectives. Firstly a sequence of actions leading to an objective. Secondly those motivational factors which influence the sequence of actions.

The action sequence is divided into three phases, consisting of a "preactional phase" where initial plans and choices are made and objectives are set (*ibid.*: 87); an "actional phase" which consists of putting those plans or choices into action (*ibid.*: 88); and finally a "postactional phase" where the learner reflects on the action which has been carried out (*ibid.*: 91). All through this process "motivational influences" (*ibid.*: 91) serve to keep the action moving. Such influences could, for example, concern the learner's self-concept or beliefs, his or her attitude to the target language or to the learning experience undergone. It may also concern his or her perception of his or her abilities, organisational skills, realism or perceived usefulness of goals set and the material possibility of achieving those goals and success or failure in doing so. Finally they could be the influences of others, family, peers, teacher or the context in which the action is carried out, institution or a wider sociocultural context.

Sociocultural factors

Sociocultural factors concern two aspects of the language learning process. In the first place there are those factors which concern maintaining social relations within a specific social context, which may be a group, class, institution or specific geographical location. In the second place, those cultural factors which the individual learner may bring to such contexts and conse-

quently cause contradictory or conflictual situations.

Social relations are essential to all human interaction and the classroom is no different. If we adopt a so-called 'communicative approach' to language teaching, then we automatically assume that participants in the experience either desire to find themselves in such a situation or that it is an integral part of their culture. The teacher will expect students to co-operate in communicative activities, which entail pairwork or groupwork. In this way there are both pedagogical and sociological forces at work. In the first place a teacher imposing a socio-psychological model on his or her students and in the second place the students' own, possibly individual, idiosyncratic or culturally conditioned models of what learning should be about. Therefore, the classroom context becomes a socioculturally charged context where:

In our different ways and to different degrees we influence the other members of each of those communities, just as we in turn are influenced by them.

(Coleman, 1996: 13)

In this climate of mutual exchange, the learner's own sense of identity comes into play, because in a learning context, if learning is viewed as bringing about change, "identity is a site of struggle and change" (Norton, 2000: 134). Change needs to be motivated by both the teacher and the learner and it is perhaps the form of the process which brings about this change which needs to be called into question. It would seem that the teacher in particular needs to be sensitive to these factors, and sensitive to what the learner can bring to the learning experience. In their study of cultural differences between the western world and China, Jin and Cortazzi (1998) argue for a model of "cultural synergy" in the teaching of second or foreign language or a form of bridge between differing cultural perspectives:

This model suggests the need for mutual understanding of different cultures, communication styles and academic cultures. This does not mean that diversity and variety will be merged into one, but that natural divisions exist and academic cultural practitioners should have an open mind to be aware of the operation of other styles and appreciate their emphasis. Cultural synergy here implies that there is an additional benefit from collaboration which is greater than the single benefit for each side in the intercultural context.

(*ibid.*: 114)

Such a problem of differing cultural perspectives is well illustrated by Kramsch (1998:17), who describes a personal experience at a language

teaching seminar she attended. Participants were language teachers from England, Germany, France and the United States. A French native speaker teacher of the language proposed using an advertisement for an exclusive Parisian department store, depicting an elegantly dressed woman holding a credit card. This was on the basis that it was full of cultural references, especially those related to class, 'privilèges' and consequently the French Revolution. However, her American colleagues viewed 'privilèges' as nothing to do with class, but with the spending power of the credit card, while the German colleagues viewed 'privilèges' as something earned through meritorious behaviour. In short:

The polysemy of the ad allows it to be read and understood by multiple audiences, who each have the right to see in it what they please. What is interesting is not so much whether the non-native speakers of French were 'right' or 'wrong' in reading this ad differently from educated native speakers, but, rather, how different sociocultural contexts elicited different readings.

(*ibid.*: 18)

Pennycook (1994: 164) is highly critical of the view that Western culture is somehow possessed of an absolute truth, and that a presumed technical and scientific superiority of Western educational practice often leads to the hasty dismissal of teaching practices which are considered 'old fashioned' or 'out of date'. This may be extended to the efforts made by learners from non-Western cultures, illustrated by the observation of Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 185), who state:

Chinese students' undoubted achievement in acquiring an advanced knowledge of grammar or memorising many English words is seen by Western teachers as being a negative factor: rather quaint, a misguided use of effort and a barrier to communication.

Pennycook (1994) takes the view of struggle in educational contexts even further, suggesting that we should take "schools as cultural and political arenas where different cultural, ideological and social forms are constantly in struggle" (*ibid.*: 297). Therefore, one of the bases for curricular planning must be to integrate an element of negotiation and openness and not on prescriptive, culturally biased principles. As Little (1995: 179) forcefully asserts:

Regrettably, public and institutional examinations mostly pay no more than lip service to this truth.

This is certainly a somewhat disturbing observation in a context where, on paper, the centrality of the learner is held to be the basis of educational policy, whether it be for languages or any other subject.

In conclusion the following points may be listed as a scheme of underlying principles which could be applied in setting up a foreign language learning programme:

- Good language learners are actively involved in the learning process – they know what they are doing and why they are doing it.
- Learners need individually compatible opportunities to learn.
- Learners need to be set realistic objectives.
- Learners are affected by factors which include their understanding of how a language works, how they organise their study, psychological factors, such as their own self-awareness and motivation and the sociocultural implications of learning a foreign or second language.
- An awareness of what it means to learn a language leads to more autonomous behaviour.

With closer attention to the above points, the value of a foreign language course may be enhanced both in terms of the learner's increased sense of satisfaction and acquired linguistic autonomy and in terms of providing the professional and academic world with proficient foreign language users.

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