Enhancing the Role of the Learner within the Language Learning Process

David Nunan, The English Centre, University of Hong Kong

Introduction

Two central ingredients that are often overlooked or undervalued in language program development are learners themselves and the learning process. In planning, implementing and evaluating language programs, it is important to ensure that these two ingredients are given as much prominence as that other critical ingredient, language, and that all three are amalgamated into an harmonious whole. In this paper, I would like to argue that all those involved in the language teaching enterprise, from teachers, to curriculum developers to materials writers, need to have a coherent view of the role that learners can play, and the importance of providing learners with an active role within the classroom by involving them in identifying, selecting, modifying, adapting and creating goals, experiential content, and learning processes.

In the course of the paper, I shall attempt to deal with the following questions:

What is the role of the learner in the learning process?
What does research and practice have to tell us about the learning
process?
How can these ideas be incorporated into pedagogical materials?

Focus on the learner

A major problem with many of the language programs I have observed in different parts of the world is that they treat the learner, either as an idiot, with little to contribute to the teaching learning process, or as a "blank slate" to be written on by the teacher, the textbook, and the learning context. This problematic view of the learner creates a degree of dissonance between teacher and learners which reduces the effectiveness of both teaching and learning. Is there anything that can be done about this? I believe that there is. I believe that where possible, learners themselves should be placed squarely at the center of the learning process, that learners should be made aware of the active role they have to play, and that where possible, information about learners and from learners should be incorporated into the curriculum planning process.

What are some of the ways in which this might be done? In the first instance, I would suggest that learners should be made aware of the goals and the content of the curriculum, learning program, or pedagogical materials. This may not seem particularly radical. However, in a study of classroom interaction which

I recently carried out, there was only one instance in which the teacher began a lesson by making it clear to the learners what they would be learning and why (see Nunan, forthcoming).

Another possibility is for learners themselves to be involved in selecting goals and content. There are several well documented accounts in which learners have been involved in such processes, and it has been found that even relatively young learners were capable of making decisions about the content and processes of their own learning (see, for example, Dam and Gabrielsen 1988)

Somewhat more ambitious is to involve learners in modifying and adapting goals and content, and even creating their own goals and content. One way of involving learners in contributing to the ongoing selection and creation of course goals and content is provided by Parkinson and O´Sullivan (1990). They report on the notion of the *action meeting* as a way of involving learners in modifying course content. At the conclusion of each teaching week, students met without the teacher, reviewed the week's work, and made recommendations about what they would like to see more of and less of in the week ahead. These *Action Meetings* provided

> an opportunity for individuals to participate (interpersonally and in-terculturally) in an English-medium meeting, negotiating meaning and authentic content. They would also be a means of facilating group cohesion and motivation and would be a primary mechanism for ongoing program evaluation by the participants. (Parkinson and O´Sullivan 1990: 119-120).

One final way of involving learners in contributing to learning content, is to find ways of linking content to the world beyond the classroom. Some years ago, I investigated the notion of the "good" foreign language learner. In foreign language contexts, I found that, while there was quite a variety at the level of classroom strategies, virtually all learners demonstrated an ability to relate the content of the classroom to the world beyond the classroom (Nunan 1989). Furthermore, they all identified this ability, to activate learning beyond the classroom, as the critical ingredient in their success as language learners. This idea of the importance of consciously developed activation of the language beyond the classroom is also reported in a second language context by Schmidt and Prota (1985).

Focus on the learning process

In the preceding section, I suggested that language classrooms could be made more effective if learners were involved in some way in the identification, selection, modification and adaptation of their own learning goals and content. In this section, I would like to suggest some ideas for encouraging similar processes in relation to the learning process itself.

The first step in sensitizing learners to the nature of the learning process, is to encourage them to identify the strategy implications of pedagogical tasks. Underlying this first step is the fact that everything we do in the classroom is "underwritten" by a learning strategy. This is so regardless of whether we are talking about communicative tasks such as role plays, selective listening or debates, or more mechanical exercises such as pronunciation drills, vocabulary memorization or cloze exercises.

The next step in the development of a learner-centered classroom would be to train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies. Detailed guidance on how this might be achieved are beginning to appear in the literature. Excellent starting points for those who are interested are provided by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Willing (1989).

At a more sophisticated level, learners would be involved in making choices among a range of options. The notion that learners are capable of making choices has been questioned by some commentators. However, several researchers have actually investigated this issue, and come up with some interesting results. Widdows and Voller (1991) for example, investigated the ability of Japanese university students to make choices. As a result of their study they found that there was a major dichotomy between what students learn and experience and what they are actually taught.

> Students do not like classes in which they sit passively, reading or translating. They do not like classes where the teacher controls everything. They do not like reading English literature much, even when they are literature majors. Thus it is clear that the great majority of university English classes are failing to satisfy learner needs in any way. Radical changes in the content of courses, and especially in the types of courses that are offered, and the systematic retraining of EFL teachers in learner-centered classroom procedures are steps that must be taken, if teachers and administrators are seriously interested in addressing their students' needs. (Widdows and Voller 1991).

Another way of sensitizing learners to the learning process would be to provide them with opportunities to modify and adapt classroom tasks. This could be a preliminary step to teaching them to create their own tasks. This need not involve highly technical materials design skills, which would clearly be unrealistic. I have started learners on the path towards developing their own materials by giving them the text but not the questions in a reading comprehension task and asking them, in small groups, to write their own questions. These are then exchanged with another group, as the basis of a comprehension and discussion session.

A logical next step is for learners to become teachers. Once again, this notion is not quite as radical as it might at first appear. Several teachers report trying this idea and having a great deal of success with it. Assinder, for example,

gave her students the opportunity of developing video-based materials which they subsequently used for teaching other students in the class. The innovation was a success, the critical factor of which, according to Assinder, was the opportunity for the learner to become the teacher:

> I believe that the goal of teaching each other was a factor of paramount importance. Being asked to present something to another group gave a clear reason for the work, called for greater responsibility to one's own group, and led to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy. The success of each group's presentation was measured by the response and feedback of the other group; thus there was a measure of in-built evaluation and a test of how much had been learned. Being an "expert" on a topic noticeably increased self-esteem, and getting more confident week by week gave (the learners) a feeling of genuine progress. (Assinder 1991:228).

Focus on materials

How might some of the principles set out in the preceding section be incorporated into pedagogical materials? In this section, I shall attempt to provide some illustrative ideas. These ideas are illustrative rather than exhaustive, but they should serve to show that self-direction and learning materials are not mutually incompatible. All of the examples have been taken from a recently published series entitled *ATLAS: Learning-centered Communication.*

Raising learner awareness

At the most superficial level, learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program, as well as encouraging students to identify the learning strategies implicit in the tasks making up the methodological component of the curriculum. While the desirability of making goals and content transparent to learners might seem obvious, it is surprising how infrequently it is done, either by teachers or materials writers. It is also a good idea to encourage learners to be reminded of instructional goals at regular intervals during a course. Samples 1 and 2 demonstrate one way of making goals explicit and reminding students of pedagogical goals. (Sample 1 would appear at the beginning of a unit of work. Sample 2 at the end.)

Sample 1:
In this unit you will:
 Report what someone says
  "The police said that I was lucky to get out of the accident alive."
 Say what people have been doing
  "They've been working on the project for months."

Sample 2:

Below, look at the language you practiced in this unit.

Can you...........?

Report what someone says

yes   a little   not yet

Find / give an example:

Say what people have been doing
yes   a little not yet

Find / give and example:.

Sample 3:

Learning strategy: **Classifying** = putting similar things together in groups.

Read the following postcard and then complete the classifying task which follows.

Dear Mike,

Hello from San Francisco. I told your
brother that I can pick you up at the air-
port on Sunday. Let's meet at your board-
ing gate. I'm twenty years old, and I'm
short with red hair and green eyes. Your
brother says you are tall with dark hair
and blue eyes. I guess we won't have any
trouble finding each other.

                                        Mr M. Frota,

                                        1600 26th Street,

                                        Chicago,

                                        Illinois
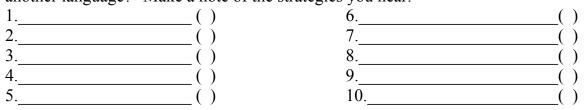
Sincerely,

Marcia de Beridino

Put the color, age and size words from the postcard in the correct boxes.

COLOR	AGE	SIZE
blue	*eighteen*	*big*

Sample 4 is a task designed to help learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies.

Sample 4:

Learning Strategy: Reflecting - thinking about ways you learn best

a) Listen. You will hear four people answering the question: "How did you learn another language?" Make a note of the strategies you hear.

1._____ ( )   6._____( )
2._____ ( )   7._____( )
3._____ ( )   8._____( )
4._____ ( )   9._____( )
5._____ ( )   10._____( )

b) Put a check mark ( ) next to those strategies you agree with.
c) Listen and identify the speaker who is most like you.
d) Listen again and identify the speaker who is least like you.

Learner involvement

At a slightly more challenging level, learners are involved in making choices about what to learn and how to learn. This is an intermediate stage between simple awareness and a subsequent stage in which learners become involved in modifying materials.   **Sample 5:**

You choose: Do A or B.
A
a) Pairwork. Brainstorm, and decide on ten items to put in a time capsule to give people 300 years form now and idea of what life was like in our times.
b) Work with another pair. Combine both lists and reduce the twenty items (your ten and the other pair's ten) to a single list of ten items.
c) Compare your list with another group.
"Well, we'd include a TV remote control, pocket cellular phone, disposable camera, jeans, rollerblades, fax machine, post-it notes, pocket computer, Gameboy and CDs."
B.
a) Pairwork. Brainstorm, and decide on the ten most useful everyday inventions of this century.
b) Work with another pair. Combine both lists and reduce the twenty items (your ten and the other pair's ten) to a composite list of ten items.
c) Compare your list with another group.
Example: "Well, we think the most important everyday items are the pall-point pen, disposable razor, zip fastener, contact lenses, post-it notes, paper towels, quartz watch, paperback book, Velcro, and cash-machine cards."

Learner autonomy

In the preceding section, I suggested that learners should ultimately transcend the classroom and make links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. There are many ways of doing this. In the final sample presented here, students have completed a unit of work based on a dis-

cussion of good and bad experiences of living with others, either family members or friends.

Sample 6:
Groupwork. Brainstorm ideas of practicing this language out of class. Imagine you are visiting an English-speaking country. Where/when might you need this language?
A/W talking head: "Well, I'd probably need to ask for advice."
Out of class: (Note for teacher: If possible, encourage students to do this task in English. Otherwise they can do it in their first language and then report back in English). Interview three people about someone they have shared accommodations with. Find out three good things and three not-so-good things and make notes. Bring the information to your next class and discuss it.

Sample 7:

Groupwork. Brainstorm ideas of practicing this language out of class. Imagine you are visiting an English-speaking country. Where/when might you need this language?
Out of class. Talk to three people who have immigrated to your country from another country of who have lived in another country for some time. Talk to them about their experiences, and report back to the class

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that language learning can be made more effective if learners themselves are involved in what are essentially curriculum processes of identifying, selecting, modifying and adapting learning goals, experiential content and learning processes. I have illustrated how this might be done by describing ideas which have been developed in a variety of different classroom contexts in several different parts of the world. In the final section of the paper, I set out some ideas which I have recently developed for a newly-published series called *ATLAS Learning-centered Communication.*

The thing that draws all of these ideas together is a belief in the centrality of the learner to the learning process. By implementing just a few of these ideas, we can make our teaching more truly learner-centered. As I have explained elsewhere (see, for example, Nunan 1988), a learner-entered curriculum will contain similar components to those contained in traditional curricula. However, the key difference is that in a learner-centered curriculum key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner. Information about learners, and, where feasible, from learners, will be used to answer the key questions of what, how, when, and how well. I invite interested readers to experiment with these ideas in their own context and situation, and to observe the fascinating ways in which teaching and learning are transformed when the learners themselves are involved in their own instructional processes.

References

Assinder, W. 1991. "Peer teachings, peer learning; one model." *ELT Journal.* 45 (3). 218-229.

Dam, L. and G. Gabrielsen. 1988. "Developing learner autonomy in a school context: A six-year experiment beginning in the learners' first year of English." In H. Holex, ed. *Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning: Present-Fields of Application.* Strasbourg. Council of Europe.

Heath, Shirley Brice. 1992. "Literacy skills or literate skills? Considerations for ESL/EFL learners." In D. Nunan, ed. *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching.* Cambridge University Press. 40-55.

Nunan, D. 1988. *The Learner-Centered Classroom.* Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. 1989. *Understanding Language Classrooms.* London. Prentice-Hall.

Nunan, D. 1992. "Teachers' interactive decision-making." In J. Flowerdew, M. Brock, and S. Hsia, eds. *Perspectives on Second Language Teacher Development.* City Polytechnic of Hong Kong.

Nunan, D. 1994. ATLAS. *Learning-centered Communication. Levels 1 and 2.* Boston. Heinle & Heinle.

Nunan, D. Forthcoming. "Hidden voices: Insiders' perspectives on classroom interaction." In K. Bailey and D. Nunan, eds. *Voices and Viewpoints: Qualitative Research in Second Language Education.*

Parkinson, L. and K. O´Sullivan. 1990. " Negotiating the learner-centered curriculum." In G. Blindly, ed. *The Second Language Curriculum in Action.* Sydney. NCELTR. 112-127.

Pienemann, M. 1989. "Is Language Teachable? Psycholinguistic experiments and hypotheses." *Applied Linguistics.* 10 (1). 40-72.

Schmidt, R. and S. Frota. 1986. "Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: A case study of an adult learner of Portuguese." In R. Day, ed. *Talking to learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition.* Rowley Mass. Newbury House. 237-326.

Slimani, Y. 1992. "Evaluating classroom interaction." In J. C. Alderson and A Beretta, eds. *Evaluating Second Language Education.* Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. xx.

Widdows, S., and P. Voller. 1991. "PANSI: A survey of ELT needs of Japanese university students." *Cross Currents.* XVIII, 2.

Willing, K. 1998. *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education.* Sydney. National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.