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Alternatives for Self-instruction in Foreign Language Education

Brian T. Quinn

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief study is to discuss the need and advantages of establishing self-instruction language centers as an integral part of foreign language departments in today's modern universities. While self-instruction is still often viewed suspiciously by many traditionally classroom orientated educators, it will be demonstrated that such individualized instruction programs can give teachers the opportunity to help students become more independent in their language learning. Self-instruction language learning is not intended to replace classroom teaching, but, in most cases, to compliment it as an alternative method for students to continue their own studies in foreign language learning. Many of the guidelines and descriptions offered in this paper have been based, in part, on the author's own experiences as both a student and teacher in self-instruction programs in the United States.

The need for increased student autonomy is especially great at Japanese universities where English classes are often large (50+) and the frequency of class meetings is low. Most students have the tendency of depending far too much on the teacher and the course content alone for whatever progress is made. However, many students fail to realize the important role they play themselves in determining their eventual overall success in language learning. It should be clearly stated that foreign languages do not have to be taught solely in the structured classroom environment. As many successful language learners can attest to, much of the significant language learning we do takes place outside the classroom, often unassisted by any conventional teacher. Therefore, it is necessary to develop learning strategies which take individual needs, interests and ultimate language objectives into account. Today's university foreign language departments should begin to focus more on the education of all students, not just the small group of language majors but especially those students of various fields who will need competent language skills in the future. Wilga Rivers exhorts language teachers to continually explore new approaches for improving and expanding the alternatives of foreign language education: "Future lawyers, anthropologists, social workers, legislators, administrators, journalists, or musicians can and will want to profit from new programs that take their needs and interests specifically into consideration." (Rivers: 170-171). It is, thus, imperative that universities keep pace with the students' growing language needs in order to adequately support them. This will,

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however, require the universities to move into new directions while carefully conserving the valuable traditional aspects of their language curriculum.

One of these new directions is that of self-instruction or sometimes called individualized instruction. Self-instruction, of course, refers to a learner who works alone without the direct aid or guidance of a teacher. In Japan, the most important foreign language taught is English and certainly few would argue that it is preferable for university students to stop taking the traditional liberal arts English classes in favor of self-guided study. However, for various reasons such as full schedules, unavailability of classes or a need to learn content areas of a language which are either underemphasized or not touched upon in most general courses, some students may have a need to pursue their studies independently. With these needs in mind, it is interesting to note that there has been a dramatic increase in the past few years of books and materials on ESP or English for Specific Purposes. Such materials specifically target narrow language content areas which need to be mastered. There are numerous areas in English, for example, which students may want to study on their own such as :

Survival English	Listening to Lectures
Social Conversation	Giving a Lecture
Reading Newspapers/Magazines	Giving a Speech
Listening to Radio News	Taking Part in Scientific Discussions
Reading for Pleasure	Writing Scientific Papers
Understanding Foreign Movies	Reading Scientific Books/Journals
Writing Private Letters	Speed Reading
Writing Formal Letters	Modern Literature

All of the above subject areas can easily be studied on one's own under the guidance of a language counselor, the details of which shall be expounded upon later in this study.

There is generally little need for self-instruction in English for Japanese students during the first two years of university education since almost all students will be required to take numerous English courses, as well as have the opportunity to usually take some elective courses. This situation changes drastically, however, for upper division students (those in their third and fourth years) and graduate students, who often suddenly come the realization that adequate English skills are absolutely necessary to succeed in their respective academic fields, only to discover that there are no longer any continuing education classes available in foreign languages. There is, at present, an apparent gap at Japanese universities in providing continuing educational opportunities in English as well as in other foreign languages for these senior students.

To better address the growing needs of upper division students, a self-access language center can be instituted where the staff teacher becomes an advisor in guiding the students in achieving their specific language learning goals on a self-paced, self-instruction basis.

WHO NEEDS SELF INSTRUCTION ?

At such a university language center, users would include undergraduates, post-

graduates, faculty members and even administrative staff members all possessing a great diversity of learning requirements. Some of them may need to learn a foreign language well enough to cope with going to a foreign country for a conference or as a tourist. Others will require an intensive review to enable them to carry out field work or studies abroad. The majority of users at such a self-paced language center will be non-specialist language learners from a wide selection of faculties in the university. As stated earlier, such a center's major objective, in Japan, would be primarily to provide necessary continuing education in English instruction, while, at the same, time be able to allow the learning of many other foreign languages as well.

A typical candidate for such a course of study would be, for example, a first year master's student in biochemistry, who has just found out that he will have to read numerous texts, journals and articles entirely in English. In addition, he will have to attend several international conferences over the next two years and if he enters the doctor course, he will probably have to spend a year or two studying abroad. He is presently extremely busy in his laboratory every day from about 8 AM to 8 PM, however, he would like to greatly improve his English. Since he is a poor student, he has no financial means to go to the expensive language schools in town, yet he would like to visit the self-instruction center two or three times a week on his lunch break or before dinner. For this type of student a self-access individualized approach to study would be highly appropriate. Undoubtedly there are many such students on campus in Japan who are at present almost without recourse under the present system.

It must be made clear, on the other hand, that self-instruction is not for everyone. Such a method is intended only for students with sufficient motivation, responsibility and previous learning experience (i. e., they know how to learn). The most important common denominator among all such students would be their strong motivation with clear goals. In such programs it has been shown that some students simply cannot cope with taking the full responsibility of learning into their own hands. Unfortunately not everyone has the maturity necessary to succeed.

HOW DOES SELF INSTRUCTION WORK ?

There will be very few students who opt for a totally autonomous learning program, however, with the development of graded self-instruction materials at an efficiently run learning center, many students will be able to proceed on a semi-autonomous basis under the guidance of a language advisor who replaces the traditional teacher. By promoting an atmosphere of self-direction in the learning process, the new teacher encourages learners to make free choices regarding their own study objectives.

Self-instruction has been most often used in the past for busy people beginning a language for the first time or for those who are learning one specific area of a language as in ESP. There should be a basic textbook, preferably developed by a self-instruction staff member or one taken from the commercial market and adapted to the needs of self-instruction. The materials should be well organized with the intention of accomplish-

ing most of what a teacher normally does in class. Answer keys in the book are necessary to permit students to check their work. Audio tapes should also accompany all individualized instruction materials. The student then studies on his own following a specific schedule agreed upon by both the instructor and the student. Thereafter, the student may consult, as necessary, with the instructor who would be available at a regular time during the week. When the student has sufficiently learned the materials for a particular unit, he could take a self-test or practice test and evaluate whether he is ready or not to take the regular test. Finally, the test is administered and the student gets a grade for the unit. If the student has not sufficiently mastered the materials he may return and take another test on the same unit at a later date.

TEACHER'S ROLE AS ADVISOR

A trained teacher, not just any available native speaker, should be regularly available to students at such a self-access learning center. The teacher takes the role of something like a reference librarian who constantly responds to the needs and inquiries of the students. The teacher gives oral tests and written tests for each unit, and is available to students for brief discussion and conversation practice. However, it is always up to the student to push the teacher. The teacher does not push the student as in the traditional classroom.

Self-instruction means, of course, self-paced learning. The students work at their own pace and may do as much or as little as they wish. Exceptionally motivated students can complete a full year's study in a couple of months, while busy or less motivated students may cover a basic one-year course over a much longer period of time. While teaching Polish at an individualized instruction center in 1981, this author had the experience of advising a student who was able to complete a full three years of Polish study in only 6 months, because he had received a scholarship to do graduate study in Poland and English is not generally spoken there. One must never forget the unique aspect of language learning. It is much like climbing a mountain. It does not really matter how long it takes to get to the summit or what route you happen to take, just as long as you eventually get to the top you are a success!

It is also important to remember that in a fully integrated self-instruction program, the student does not need to rely on the same teacher for advice. Such a center would be staffed by different teachers on different days, all of whom should be able to guide the student and give advice. There, of course, will be much less flexibility for less commonly taught languages such as Korean, or Spanish which might only have a qualified instructor present once a week.

As previously mentioned, the teacher does not "teach" the student in such a program, but guides the student down the path of independent learning. It is, therefore, necessary to actually show students how to go about learning a language and then help them to make a clear and realistic study schedule.

During the initial interview, the instructor should determine what the student has

previously learned in the language, if anything. Then the teacher has to establish what the student's present level is, such as with English. Next the teacher should determine how the student expects to use the language in the future. Finally, the teacher must decide whether self-instruction is appropriate or not for that student. After determining appropriateness, he must familiarize the student with all the available materials at his disposal on file at the center and show the student how to best utilize such resources. Later during the course of study the teacher could help introduce the student to some existing support groups such as : conversation circles, magazine reading/discussion groups, language exchange organizations and finally pen friend associations.

LEARNING CONTRACTS

All language learners need to know that their learning is purposeful to be successful. They must feel that they are indeed making progress. Therefore, one way of providing structure in self-instruction is by having the student make a learning contract based on the desired material to be covered. Such a contract provides the student with a clear framework to base his studies. The contract specifies the minimal amount of work the student should complete in a certain period of time. Learners tend to need quite a lot of help at first with such contracts because they often have little idea as to what might be an appropriate amount of work to undertake. In a basic language course such as French I, the contract is rather simple. A student will contract a few units at a time and work in progression. ESP contracts for theme based learning, on the other hand, will need a lot of tailoring to meet individual student needs. In American universities, where grades play an important role in students both getting a job and entering graduate school, the successful completion of the learning contract is essential in allowing the teacher to properly evaluate the student on the university 4.0 point scale. In Japan, where grades play such an insignificant role in academics, such contracts serve as a kind of motivator to encourage the students in continuing their studies.

All language learning contracts should include:

1. Learning objectives
2. Learning plan
3. Materials and resources to be utilized
4. Methods for demonstrating proficiency

After successfully developing a learning contract agreed upon by both teacher and student then the student is on his own until test time.

GRADING

In a self-instruction program at Japanese universities, grading is simply not a factor of major interest to the students because it does not influence their academic or professional careers. Yet, many students may want to receive credit for the work accomplished or a future letter of reference on their overall language ability. As a result, a proper system of evaluation is still needed even in Japan.

The fairest means of evaluation is by testing students on the material after completion of each stage in the the course. In many programs, the student will be allowed to re-take the test until he successfully passes. This means that there must be at least two or more tests available for each level. Some programs utilize self-assessment by giving the students self-tests which they may take and correct themselves without receiving an official grade. However, the latter system leads to a significant reduction in student motivation. All students tend to put in an extra effort in learning when they know a “teacher” will be testing them on the material.

Due to the fact that many universities allow students to re-take the tests until the students are satisfied with their grades, these programs have become extremely popular with many so-called “pre-med” and “pre-law” students who must maintain almost a “straight-A” record during their undergraduate career if they hope to get accepted at the most prestigious graduate schools.

Grading is a somewhat unpleasant but integral part of the self-instruction learning process. By establishing a fair grading policy, the students will be better motivated to complete their contracted course work successfully and on time.

DEVELOPING MATERIALS

One of most important steps in creating an effective self-instruction curriculum is by developing a fully integrated series of learning materials for basic, intermediate, advanced and eventually ESP learners. There are basically two choices facing the new program designer, whether to chose commercially available materials or to write the learning materials themselves.

There are numerous commercially available texts on the market which are convenient and full of variety. However, the great majority of these have not been designed for self-instruction. Thus, even before they can be used, supplementary texts, answer keys, tests, etc., must be written in order to make them effective in self-study. There is also the important question of protecting copyright laws which strictly limit the ability of a school to make copies of the materials.

Most people, therefore, agree that the most appropriate materials are those written by the school's own staff for the specific purpose of self-instruction. Developing such materials is very time consuming and cannot be achieved without the administrative and financial support of the university.

Whatever materials are eventually selected for use, they should all have the following:

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| 1. Clear Objectives | — what to learn and how |
| 2. Flexibility | — to meet various student needs |
| 3. Sufficient Instructions | — show how to progress in the book |
| 4. Language Learning Advice | — show different strategies |
| 5. Answer Keys | — for self checking |
| 6. Feedback | — tell why and how mistakes are made |

- 7. Tests —three tests for each unit
- 8. Record Keeping —Checklists for each unit and drills give students a sense of progress
- 9. Reference Materials —Highly integrated vocabulary and grammar tables
- 10. Indexing —enabling students to find explanations of grammar points as needed

When starting to produce materials from scratch, most schools choose first to adopt those commercially available while, at the same time, steadily developing their own study packages on a step-by-step basis. Many schools utilize summer vacation as the most opportune time to gather a team of teachers to write out one entire course level (i. e. basic) In this way, after three years, a school would be able to develop a complete basic, intermediate and advanced package for the major languages to be offered at the learning center.

SETTING UP A SELF-ACCESS LEARNING CENTER

There are four critical factors which must be adequately dealt with in the establishing of a successful self-instruction center :

- Access —the centers should be open for long hours to maximize their use and convenience. Monday-Friday 8 AM to 8 PM is usual.
 - Information —all available materials must be clearly indexed for easy retrieval.
 - Workspace —There should be enough space for learners to review, use tapes or videos, meet with instructors, meet in small groups and make copies of needed materials.
 - Staff —A professional staff member should be on duty during regular working hours while students can work the evening shift on a part-time-basis to handle administrative duties.
 - Instructors —Self-instruction advisors should be available on a regularly scheduled basis. With a three hour block equal to one 90 minute teaching period. There would be three instructor shifts :
- Shift
- A 9 am to 12 noon
 - B 1 pm to 4 pm
 - C 5 pm to 8 pm

The teachers would work at the self-instruction center on a rotational basis. It is preferable to have the teacher work two or three periods on different days during his semester in order to enable busy students to have a better chance of seeing him for advice. One excellent method of manning such a center is with the use of graduate students who

could also gain valuable teaching experience while helping other students.

Regarding languages such as English, it is preferable to have at least one instructor on duty at all times, when feasible. In staffing the center for other languages there may be much less flexibility and a qualified instructor may only be present a day or two per week. It is essential in such a case that the instructors always come at a fixed time so the students can plan their meetings. Often teachers who are multiply qualified in two or three languages are a great help in staffing the center.

Some universities also stock the center with numerous languages for which no instructor is available. In the studying of such languages the student would truly be on his own and the materials provided would be normal commercial ones.

TEACHER TRAINING

The teachers who are guiding and evaluating the students in self-instruction need both training and special preparation before undertaking their role. One of the most effective methods is to have the new instructors spend about a week of observing the center while receiving on-the-job training. Such a teacher should be knowledgeable in the language area a student would like to study and, most importantly, be completely familiar with the available materials related to a student's desired subject area. The teacher need not be an expert in a particular ESP field in order to be of great assistance to the student, since the teacher's wealth of experience in language learning should allow him to help the student organize study plans and maximize the final results.

Finally, the best instructors in a self-instruction program are those who have been working at such a center for a couple of years. If a foreign language department adequately rotates staff members, then after several years all members will feel confident to handle the new responsibilities.

SELF-INSTRUCTION : A CASE STUDY

One of the most successful and most extensive self-instruction programs in the world is presently in operation at the Ohio State University in the United States. As of September 1989, fourteen languages including Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Latin, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish and Ukrainian were being offered. All of the above languages are fully taught on the basic/intermediate levels with eight of the languages continuing up to the advanced level. Hundreds of students are enrolled each semester taking full advantage of their independent study approach.

The acronym TAMBSPI (Teacher-Assisted, Mastery-Based, Self-Paced Instruction) is used at Ohio State University to describe the major features of the system. This program has even recently expanded to teach most of the above languages to off-campus students through telephone teacher assistance designated by the acronym TELE-TAMBSPI.

Ohio State University began to experiment with individualized self-instruction in 1975 and thanks to a major grant from the United States Government National Endowment of

the Humanities, basic materials for six languages were developed by 1976. Many American students utilize the TAMBSPI center to fulfill their one or two year foreign language requirement. It is also popular with graduate students who are frequently unable to take regularly scheduled classes. More languages are being added to the program yearly and similar centers have begun to spring up at many other major universities in North America.

The author has previously taught both Russian and Polish at the Ohio State center in addition to studying Serbo-Croatian there as a student as well. Based on the dual experience at the center, it is clear that without some kind of teacher assistance and well organized plan of study, including testing and grading, it becomes difficult for students to maintain sufficient motivation to eventually achieve their original learning objectives.

Thanks to such innovative programs as described above there is now growing interest in initiating such curricula around the world.

CONCLUSION

There is an increasing need in Japan for educators to better meet the growing foreign language needs of students from various academic fields. The traditional two year liberal arts English curriculum presently offered, while still of great value, does not meet the needs of students who must continue in graduate studies, go overseas or use their language skills professionally. The establishment of self-instruction programs at Japanese universities would, without a doubt, present numerous obstacles and difficulties to foreign language departments, however, it is believed that the effective establishment of self-access language centers could provide an important alternative to better meet the needs of today's students in a rapidly changing world.

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