

Learners Talking: Implications for Teacher-Led Autonomy

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1. Justification of the approach

The connection between learner and teacher autonomy must lie primarily in expertise surrounding the learning of a second language and the way in which that expertise develops in both learners and teachers. Our interests lie in exploring the value of dialogue for uncovering the diversity of learners' experiences of the task of second language learning. If teachers are to play a role in assisting the process of discovery, then they need to understand not only the more universal conditions required for learning to occur, but also the variety of individual human approaches to the task and the difficulties that are experienced.

Dialogue by its very nature is free-ranging, and dialogue with learners about learning can cover any number of problems, beliefs, feelings, expectations. The conversations with learners that we report on in this paper were of a particular type. They were all initiated by learners who were experiencing some difficulty in learning a language. In other words, the content of the dialogues enabled us to view them all in a problem-solution frame. The learners would typically express a difficulty and want advice on what to do about it.

A problem-solution framework is helpful because it enables teachers and learners to share problem-solving, to explicitly explore or discover possible solutions to specific learning difficulties. This is a stance that is compatible with learner autonomy and does not over-privilege the teacher's knowledge of how to do things.

An emerging focus of the work we have been doing is to capitalise on the experience of talking with many learners by looking for commonalities without losing the details of the specific instances. The outcome of the research is thus intended to be a data-base of problem elements and associated solutions. At this stage we are focussing on the problems: problems in the form of expressed difficulty. The solutions have a different status. They are strategic responses to the difficulties experienced; these responses derive from research or from the personal experience of the advisors or learners. The strategic responses need to be evaluated in each instance to take account of variables such as learning style, available resources, and how well they address the actual nature of the difficulty. A brief outline of the problem-solution framework is presented in the next section.

2. A problem-solution framework for dealing with difficulties in learning a language

We perceive the problem-solution interview as having two basic and obvious parts: representing the problem and exploring a solution. These parts constitute two distinct elements of the interview although they are not necessarily sequential. In practice the problem may be further elaborated while exploring the solution.

REPRESENTING THE PROBLEM

Because our learners elect to come to a meeting with an advisor, the starting point in our dialogues is almost always an expression of difficulty. In most cases, the learners do not perceive in detail what the problem is: it tends to be a general sense of not learning - of not making progress, of being about to fail the course - rather than a representation of why.

Once the approach to the learning advisor has been made, an important focus for the advisor is the attempt to further analyse the problem - to prompt for more information about previous successful or unsuccessful language learning experience, to raise awareness of the nature of the difficulty - whether it is to do with learning or performance, affect or technique.

In section 3 we present an overview of the types of problems that have so far been reported on by learners in our interviews.

EXPLORING A SOLUTION

The exploration of solutions is more demanding. To move on to finding a possible solution, one has to assume that the representation of the problem is correct. There is no point, for example, in only exploring a technical solution if the problem is largely affective. On the other hand, a technical solution may provide the confidence that is needed to address an affective difficulty.

We tend to begin by looking at how the problem relates to the learner's overall needs and goals and deciding how important it is to address this particular problem at this point. If it is important, we try to explore solutions that take account of all the elements of the problem as presented. If the problem is principally affective but based on a sense of not learning well, or communicating in class well, then we explore technical and affective strategies that will build ability and therefore confidence. In doing this, we have to take account of the resources available and constraints on particular strategies, including time and personality factors.

Like the problems, the solutions can be developed into a data-base: not just a bank of strategies, but a data-base that maintains the links between the initial problem and the potential responses to the problem. This allows teachers and learners to draw on collective experience when working with specific instances of problem-solving about learning.

3. Problem types

The problems articulated by the language learners we interviewed have been classified into five categories according to the language learning difficulty they involve: remembering, hearing, writing, speaking and feedback. It was decided to retain the learners' names for the categories since the framework must eventually be used by learners. Each problem type is illustrated by an example in Table 1.

When looked at as a whole, this small collection of learner interviews reflects a number of recurrent problem types which could serve as a starting point for dialogue about appropriate solutions. In the next section we suggest ways in which this set of problems and the broader problem-solution framework might prove useful to language learners and language teachers.

Table 1

Problem Type	Example
REMEMBERING	
Remembering discrete linguistic items	I'm also really bad at like I mean at remembering prepositions. (Learner A)
Remembering grammatical patterns	...there's just learning the verbs and then learning the different people that you put connect them with .. and the different types of verbs the different tenses like past present future and stuff like that all trying to remember them .(Learner B)
Remembering fixed routines	we're having er an oral test, we have to prepare like a dialogue ...been going through and trying to read out some of the words cause we have to learn them perfectly for the thing but some of them are quite difficult to say. (Learner C)
HEARING	
Hearing individual sounds	I noticed I had a problem with [in Italian] 'i' and [in Italian] 'gli' so I obviously don't listen properly. (Learner C)
Hearing differences in accent	...my dictation a few days ago ...I have a feeling that I have a lot of mistakes .. I need to get used to somebody's pronunciation and it's very difficult. (Learner D)
WRITING	
Writing accurately	...it seems to be a impossible task for me to write an a formal letter without mistakes.(Learner E).
SPEAKING	
Speaking accurately	I can communicate now but do it like more effectively would be to like use my tenses properly and my verbs properly and get those lit- those incy bitsy things and just make it sound more flying. (Learner B)
FEEDBACK	
Feedback	I couldn't hear my mistakes ...that's the only thing at university nobody tells you because there's a hundred and fifty of you .. but nobody actually sits down and go [learner's name] do you realise you're doing the English 'a'. (Learner H)

4. How does such a perspective help the teacher and the learner?

The task of the learner is to exploit learning opportunities for language development. The task of the teacher is not only to provide learning opportunities for learners, but also to facilitate the use of those opportunities by the learners. The range of opportunities is well indicated by research on teaching and learning. Our perspective looks at the next part of the question: how is the uptake of opportunities facilitated? By looking at learners who are having difficulties of some kind, we gain better insight into what factors can prevent learners from using opportunities in the most effective way. Developing a data-base of difficulties, and of potential strategies related to these difficulties, could have several practical outcomes (Table 2).

Table 2

Usefulness of data-bases	P o t e n t i a l benefits for the learner	P o t e n t i a l benefits for the teacher
Acknowledging the difficulty	A realisation that he or she is not the only one to experience the difficulty	Awareness of a diversity of difficulties that the teacher may not have experienced
Refining the problem	A more specific representation of the problem is likely to lead to a more specific solution	Guidelines on the possible nature of the problem
Choosing a response to the problem	A data-base of solutions matched with difficulties will provide suggestions for action that can be tried out	Guidelines on solutions to suggest to the learner

The challenge of collecting this information is to organise and present it in a way that is useful for learners and teachers who want to improve language learning. We are aware that there are a number of issues in meeting this challenge. The questions below invite discussion of those issues.

5. Questions for discussion:

What are the limitations of a problem-solution framework in dealing with learner's learning?

How can the effectiveness of the strategic response to the difficulty be evaluated?

How could the data-bases be used interactively to support learning?

What would be the best user-interface for such a data-base?