

**ASSUMPTIONS AND HIDDEN AGENDAS
IN ICT MATERIALS: HOW DOES AUTONOMIZATION
COME IN?**

Richard DUDA

CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues)
ATILF/CNRS, Université Nancy 2 (France)

Résumé

Cette communication s'efforcera d'évaluer les conditions dans lesquelles les dispositifs d'apprentissage fondés sur les TIC peuvent ou non contribuer à l'autonomisation des apprenants. Trois positions extrêmes sont en présence. Certains considèrent que les TIC sont « neutres » par rapport à la question de l'autonomie ou l'autonomisation des apprenants. D'autres estiment qu'elles présentent la solution radicale en vue de cette autonomisation. D'autres enfin suggèrent qu'elles peuvent même être un frein à l'autonomisation. En définitive cela sera l'analyse des choix didactiques, implicites et explicites, des concepteurs qui permettra en dernier ressort de jauger la dimension autonomisante des matériels mis à la disposition des apprenants.

Abstract

This paper will attempt to assess to what extent ICT materials can contribute or not to autonomizing learners. Three options are available. Some specialists consider that ICTs are neutral with regard to the question of learner autonomy or learner autonomization. Others consider that they represent a radical solution to the question of autonomization. Finally, some suggest that they may even be a hindrance to autonomization. The analysis of the overt and covert didactic choices made by designers should help to gauge the potential for autonomization within the materials on offer to learners.

Introduction

I am the spokesman for a working party at CRAPEL, where research is always a team effort. This is why I will occasionally use the pronoun “we”, thereby referring to our joint efforts and not because I have regal aspirations.

What I am going to try and do in this paper is to voice our opinion as to what would appear to be the necessary conditions for ICT based language learning materials to validly contribute to autonomizing learners. Some of what I will say may appear opinionated but I will not criticize existing materials that do not state that they plan to promote autonomy of any sort. There does exist, however, a fairly common perception that ICTs have an in-built potential for developing learners’ autonomy. This is based on various features of the soft- and hardware: free navigation and flexible use, due mainly to lap-top technology.

But before we go any further I would like to say a word or two about the distinction between autonomy and autonomization. The word “autonomy” quite clearly often seems to refer to what one might call “linguistic autonomy”, ie the ability to produce sentences easily in the target language. A few years ago, however, the French Instructions Officielles for Secondary Schools linked autonomy to the concept of learning to learn. But now autonomy is very much about linguistic ability in the very same Instructions. Recently David Little of Trinity College Dublin had the following to say about the issue at an UNTELE colloquium in Compiègne, France:

In formal language learning the development of autonomy requires that learners use the target language at once as medium of classroom communication, channel of learning, and tool for reflection. (D. Little, 2004)

David Little, who knows all about autonomy as the learner’s ability to organize and manage his/her language learning, conflates the issue of autonomy with that of linguistic ability, which poses a number of problems that will be addressed later on.

Henceforth I will not address the issue of *linguistic* autonomy but that of *methodological* autonomy, ie the learner’s ability to organize his/her learning. Regardless of the semantic niceties involved in trying to define autonomy, we consider that one of our main responsibilities as teachers, trainers or advisers is to help learners develop methodological autonomy. This is why we prefer to use the word “autonomization”, thereby suggesting a *process* rather than the ideal *state* implied by “autonomy”.

In my talk I will specify the principles that underlie the ICT based materials that we have developed. By implication you will deduce that we consider that materials that do not comply with these principles cannot contribute to autonomizing learners. Admittedly it is not inconceivable that autonomous or self-directed learners may use “authoritarian” materials in a satisfactory way as far as they are concerned, but that is another topic. We are often concerned by learners who have not developed their potential for autonomous work, and therefore they should be uppermost in our minds and of most concern to us.

I will thus deal with the six following topics:

- Learning vs teaching.
- Developing communicative competence.
- Separating language skills vs integrating them.
- Using authentic documents.
- Developing the learner's metacognitive ability.
- Developing the learner's language and learning awareness.

One may have the impression that the first two topics are uncontroversial. But let's have a closer look.

1. Learning vs teaching

The basic idea here is that what matters most in our job as language teachers is that the learners are of paramount importance and that teaching should be "subordinated" to learning. Better still, and that is where things start getting complicated, is it possible to design learning materials which include no teaching and why not no exercises? "What's the point?" I can hear some of you think. It is precisely because we would like to autonomize our students from a methodological point of view that we deem it necessary, in so far as that is possible, not to provide exercises that belong to the teaching tradition. We will come back to this point later on as we believe that traditional exercises—translations, comprehension questions, grammatical tests and so on—are liable to reinforce beliefs or representations about learning that are counter-productive for the whole learning process.

2. Developing communicative competence

Yet again a fairly uncontroversial principle, but whose implications require close examination. What components of communicative competence might validly be developed by ICTs? Speech acts or language functions come to mind of course, including cultural features of the target language. Whereas language training setups or tools, of whatever description—ICTs, face to face teaching, textbooks or cassettes—usually consider that learning a language is about learning a whole, a *holos*, we believe very much in the concept of partial competence, which leads us to the third, and more controversial principle.

3. Separating language skills vs integrating them

Two quotes to prove my point about how controversial this issue is:

dissatisfaction with the artificiality of the division between the four skills has led to suggestions to base curriculum organisation on tasks or macro-functions like eg transacting, establishing and maintaining a relationship, discussing. (B. North, 1994)

The phrase "dissatisfaction with the artificiality of the division between the four skills" that Brian North produces with so much aplomb is characteristic of theoreticians and methodologists who are no longer, or have never been, in close contact with what grassroots learners really need.

Under the auspices of the Council of Europe, Joe Sheils published an excellent book in 1988 where he analyzed language learning activities mainly for the teaching of English, French and German in secondary schools. In the Introduction to the book he states the following:

a somewhat traditional-looking approach has been adopted in that the four skills are treated in separate chapters. It is hoped, however, that this organisation will not be interpreted as suggesting a discrete skills approach to teaching. Their integration is so obvious that it has not been thought necessary to draw attention to this at all times and teachers quite naturally integrate skills in classroom activities. (J. Sheils, 1988)

The phrases “traditional-looking approach”, “integration is so obvious”, and “teachers quite naturally integrate skills in classroom activities” have a definitive air about them, which is somewhat incautious in consideration of what actually goes on in foreign language training, especially in adult education and the field of languages for special purposes, which some secondary schools are involved in.

The above quotes stem from specialists from the British Isles. But interestingly enough the production of teaching materials geared to a specific skill has been especially fruitful in that part of the world. I might quote Count Me In by Steve Elsworth (1982), Study Listening by Tony Lynch (1983), Academic Writing Course by R.R. Jordan (1990, 2nd edition), Giving Presentations by M. Ellis and N. O’Driscoll (1992). One must then conclude that the court is still out on the issue. The paucity of similar materials for French as a Foreign Language is striking.

The debate about a “discrete skills approach”, to quote Sheils, versus an “integrated approach” has been going on for the last thirty years or so. I will not present the arguments here for separating skills, or more precisely training skills separately; that has been done elsewhere (R. Duda, 1979). I will therefore skip the psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and linguistic arguments supporting a discrete skills approach and will concentrate briefly on the main pedagogical argument, ie the asymmetry in the way receptive and productive skills develop over time. It is quite easy to observe in a classroom situation that, given appropriate learning conditions, the rate of progress in receptive skills is much faster than in productive skills.

To illustrate the relevance of a discrete skills approach further, may I mention a personal experience as a language trainer in adult education in France. A few years ago, the CRAPEL was involved in training technicians specializing in the maintenance of Hertzian television relays. They needed to read technical literature in English. Once our course was over their Training Officer asked them if they would be interested in a course in spoken English. Much to his surprise they declined the offer. All they were interested in was reading English and they had no need professionally or personally for spoken English. They were quite happy to acquire a partial competence in English.

Recently I took part in a dinner-debate with some company managers, bankers and representatives of local chambers of Commerce and Industry in relation to attempts to sell our University’s know-how. I mentioned our interest in a discrete skills approach to communication by suggesting that conversations could very well be held in two or three languages. Speakers would use their mother tongue or a language they knew well and understand the language spoken by the other

participants to the conversation. A member of the audience immediately mentioned his own experience speaking French to one of his German colleagues while she spoke English to him. He was delighted to hear that at the University we did not think unkindly of partial competence and even encouraged it.

I am aware that teachers of young learners might find the idea unappetizing, but in the United States, James Asher of Total Physical Response fame has been defending the idea for the last forty years that children could learn several languages at the same time via listening comprehension (J. Asher, 1986; R. Lafayette, 1991). For our part we have recently developed DVD-ROMs geared to helping speakers of Czech, Hungarian and Polish improve their listening comprehension in French and helping speakers of French develop their comprehension of Czech, Hungarian or Polish. The *Ecouter pour Comprendre* (EPCO) project, as we call it, was supported by the European Commission, the Lorraine Regional Council and the University of Nancy 2 (see the attendant website at <http://www.epc.univ-nancy2.fr/>). The Appendix here shows excerpts from one of the DVD-ROMs. There are two main components: a section called “Méthode” and another called “Documents”. The Méthode comprises advice on listening comprehension techniques and procedures; the Documents are excerpts from television programmes, which leads us to the next point.

4. Using authentic documents

When it comes to training learners in listening or reading, the use of authentic documents seems a fairly obvious strategy and many language teachers do use them. I will not address the technical or legal complications that the use of such documents may entail. Nor will I bother about the semantic quibbling over authentic documents losing their authenticity when used in the classroom or recorded on a DVD.

The main reason for using such documents is that they are aimed at native language audiences. Therefore they will contain tokens of the target language (TL) that will enable the learners to make hypotheses about the TL in real situations. Documents produced by the best writers in the language teaching and publishing business hardly ever provide that opportunity because of the inevitable structural problems due to linguistic / pedagogical simplifications, not to mention phonological problems such as intonation and rhythm even when the recordings are made by native speakers.

5. Developing the learner’s metacognitive ability

As proponents of a cognitive approach to language learning, we believe that learners need to develop their metacognitive ability. The ability to stand back, as it were, in order to take stock of what is going on when one tries to learn a foreign language should contribute to improving the actual learning of the language. This would imply that the reflection thus engaged should be conducted in the best possible conditions, ie in the learner’s first language and not the TL as suggested by David Little in my first quote. ICTs should therefore afford the learner the possibility of engaging in some linguistic introspection, even if this might appear to be outside the

scope of the average language teacher's brief. Introspection of this sort can contribute to the next and final point.

6. Developing the learner's language and learning awareness

Thanks to the conversations we have with our learners in our adult education scheme based on principles of self-direction (M-J. Gremmo, 1995a), we realized that what we explore along with the learners are their and our representations (or beliefs) about the languages they want to learn and language learning itself. In fact these beliefs may be about language in general and not a specific language.

A few years ago the CRAPEL organized an experimental English language course for technicians and engineers (M-J. Gremmo, 1995b) who worked for a French automobile company. Among the activities that were set up were some based on Swahili and Swedish. This of course may sound somewhat irrelevant in an English language course, but the idea was to get the learners to realize that they had an in-built ability to make valid hypotheses about the structure of Swahili for instance, akin to that of students in linguistic science when confronted with translated corpora in unknown languages. Similarly the teachers / advisors offered activities geared to developing a better awareness of what language learning is about and what processes may be applied generally by learners in connection with individual variations (among which learning styles; see Duda and Riley, 1990). Among these processes, becoming aware of one's ability to self-assess one's linguistic performance and learning techniques is crucial in developing overall learning awareness. Learners are usually brought up to believe that assessment of their performance is necessarily some outside body's responsibility. We wish to challenge that belief, among others. For instance learners are usually convinced that learning a language has to be based on exercises and activities which have been developed by someone else. Providing traditional exercises can only reinforce that belief.

Conclusion

Our fundamental concern therefore is to what extent ICTs can contribute to developing language and learning awareness. Since the 1970s we have been trying to develop such awareness via the counselling sessions in the self-directed learning system we have set up as a contribution to continuing education. Our interest in ICTs stemmed in part from the wish to develop a quasi "expert-system" which could simulate our face to face counselling sessions up to a point. We also wish to provide easy permanent access to the kind of counselling we have to offer. We have therefore developed DVD-ROMs as mentioned earlier and websites in support of these which also provide on-line counselling facilities. Pure and simple autonomization of counselling in the field of language learning does not seem feasible or even desirable. The contribution of an advisor to the question of how to go about the job of learning a language is still very much the order of the day in the teaching / counselling community.

REFERENCES

- ASHER, J.J. 1986. *Learning Another Language through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook* (3rd ed). Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions Inc.
- DUDA, R. 1979. "Are language skills irrelevant?" *Mélanges Pédagogiques*. CRAPEL, Université Nancy 2.
- DUDA, R. & RILEY, P. (eds). 1990. *Learning Styles*. Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy.
- ELLIS, M. & O'DRISCOLL, N. 1992. *Giving Presentations*. London: Longman.
- ELSWORTH, S. 1982. *Count Me In. Understanding Numbers in English*. London: Longman.
- GREMMO, M-J. 1995a. "Conseiller n'est pas enseigner: Le rôle du conseiller dans l'entretien de conseil". *Mélanges Pédagogiques*, 22. CRAPEL, Université Nancy 2.
- GREMMO M-J. 1995b. "Former les apprenants à apprendre: Les leçons d'une expérience". *Mélanges Pédagogiques*, 22. CRAPEL, Université Nancy 2.
- JORDAN, R.R. 1990. *Academic Writing Course* (2nd ed). London: Collins ELT.
- LAFAYETTE, R.C. 1991. "Total Physical Response, un apprentissage non conventionnel". *Le Français dans le Monde*, 239.
- LITTLE, D. 2004. "Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy and the European Language Portfolio". *UNTELE*, Université de Compiègne.
- LYNCH, T. 1983. *Study Listening*. Cambridge: CUP.
- NORTH, B. 1994. *Perspectives on Language Proficiency and Aspects of Competence*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- SHEILS, J. 1988. *Communication in the Modern Languages Classroom*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

APPENDIX



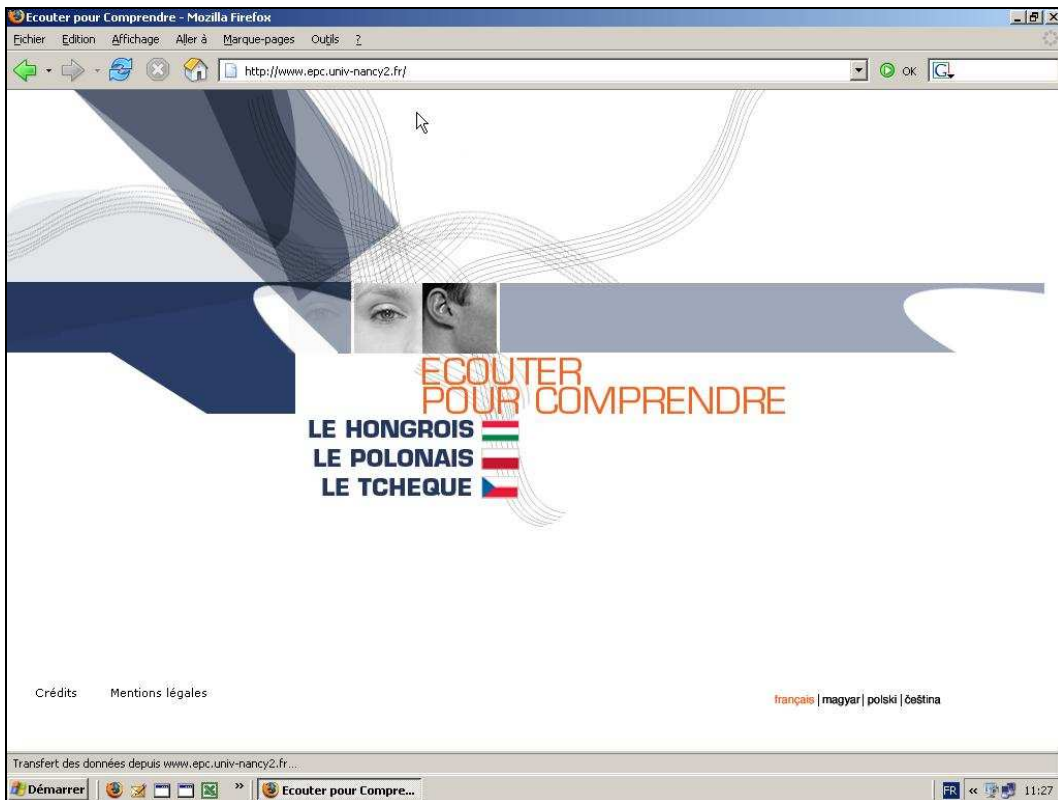
1. DVD-ROM: Ecouter pour Comprendre le Hongrois. Home page.



2. DVD-ROM: Ecouter pour Comprendre le Hongrois. Main menu.



3. DVD-ROM: Ecouter pour Comprendre le Tchèque. Screen shot of a video document.



4. Web site: Ecouter pour Comprendre. Home page.